some of us have childhoods that aren't poems on sight (but darling, you're doing alright)

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some of us have childhoods that aren't poems on sight (but darling, you're doing alright)

by mrs_d

Summary

Bruce Wayne, as the world knew him, was only a few parenting skills away from Jack Drake, and, on paper anyway, his lifestyle was certainly familiar. But now Tim was in a bedroom in Wayne Manor, a mile away from where he grew up, and just six doors down from where the frickin' Batman slept.

An AU in which Bruce Wayne starts fostering Tim Drake without any real knowledge of who Tim is. (While Tim, of course, knows **exactly** who Bruce is.)

I do not consent to having my work posted anywhere other than AO3. If you find this story elsewhere, please contact me immediately at the email address in my profile or via direct messaging on my Tumblr.

Notes

Logic dictates that I should not start posting this random AU that came to me in the middle of the night last weekend, but who listens to logic nowadays? The heart wants what it wants, and my CPTSD-inflicted heart has fallen head over heels into neglected child!Tim Drake stories, so here we are. I am who I am, and I'll not apologize (much).

I will say, however, as a caveat to any hardcore fans, that my knowledge of canon is pretty limited. I'm just here to have a good time, so I'm not terribly concerned about accuracy or timelines, etc. If that bothers you, feel free to click the back button and go find something else to read.

Title comes from Carolina by Adeem the Artist. This story also has a full playlist you can check out here on Spotify, if you are interested.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Batman was down in the Cave when Bruce Wayne's cell phone started ringing. It buzzed and spun beside the keyboard for almost ten seconds before Batman pulled his eyes down from the monitor to look at the caller ID.

Lillian - Child Services, it read.

Why is she *calling,* Batman wondered, but the curiosity was distant. Like everything was on days like this.

He watched the phone ring for another few seconds, then reached out and picked it up, sliding his gauntleted thumb across the icon to answer the call.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Mr. Wayne?"

"Yes, speaking," said Bruce Wayne.

"Hi, this is Lillian Bartlett, I'm not sure if you remember me?" She lowered her voice somewhat and added, "I was Jason's case worker."

"I remember," said Bruce, unable to dredge up even an audible fake smile. "How are you?"

Lillian blew out a breath. "I feel like I should be asking you that question."

Bruce gave a rather Batman-like grunt, but said nothing.

"My condolences," she added, "again. First anniversaries are hard."

"Yes," Bruce agreed, his eyes falling on the headline splashed across the screen of the Batcomputer.

Nearly One Year after Death of Billionaire's Son in Ethiopia, Questions Remain.

"What can I do for you, Ms. Bartlett?" he asked after a moment of somewhat awkward silence.

"Well, Mr. Wayne," she began, "I wondered if you had any interest in

becoming an active foster parent with the State again."

It took Bruce a moment to process that. The words had come out in a rush, like Lillian was afraid she wouldn't be able to say them if she didn't say them all at once. He blinked, the headline flickering in front of him.

"I thought I'd been removed from the list," he said, not bothering to hide his irritation. "I *asked* to be removed from the list."

"You did," Lillian said quickly. "And, I assure you, you were. This is a... personal call, Mr. Wayne."

Bruce noticed the time in the corner of the monitor— 19:52. How long had he been down here? Why hadn't Alfred come down with a plate, or a pointed stare at least, until Bruce came up for dinner?

Then he remembered that Alfred's week off started today. He'd boarded the plane for London before Bruce had finished sleeping off last night's work— down here, on the cot. Upstairs was too quiet with the boys gone.

Boy. Not *boys.* Dick had moved to Blüdhaven, and Jason was never coming home again.

"Mr. Wayne?" said Lillian's voice. "Are you still there?"

He thought about hanging up on her. That would be answer enough. But Bruce Wayne was too polite to disappear like Batman.

"I'm here," he said. "You were telling me why you were calling?"

"Yes," said Lillian. "I've got a case, a new one. I can't give many details, and... well, I'd probably be in a lot of trouble if my superiors found out about this call." She hesitated. "I— I'm trusting you, Mr. Wayne, because I think you can help. I hope you can, anyway."

The curiosity was back, dim like a candle flame drowning in wax, but burning nonetheless.

"This will stay between us," he promised her. "You have my word."

"Thank you," said Lillian with obvious relief. "We have a child who was declared a ward of the State almost a year ago. Since then, they've been bounced from one foster home to another, not staying much more than a month at each."

Bruce's eyebrows went up. "That's quite the record," he observed neutrally. "Anger issues?"

"I can't say," said Lillian, true to her word about protecting the child's privacy. "But they're not a typical case. At least, not one that I've seen before. You see, they grew up in a very wealthy family."

"Ah," said Bruce, the pieces beginning to fall into place.

"I think part of the issue is that none of our foster parents can offer anything remotely similar to what they were used to."

"But I could," Bruce guessed.

"Well... yes," said Lillian, sounding almost sheepish. "If you were willing to re-activate your status, the child could go to you, at least for a few days to try it out. But, Mr. Wayne, I completely understand if the answer is no. What you've been through is very hard for a parent, for anyone."

She kept talking, saying the kinds of things that Bruce had been hearing for months now. It was easy enough to tune her out as his eyes travelled around the Cave. Everywhere he looked, he saw Jason. From the workout mats—*Keep up, old man!*—to the Batmobile maintenance area— *So, even if I'd managed to steal 'em, you had, like, forty spares? Lame.*

He couldn't do this to himself again. He *wouldn't* do this to a kid again. *No more Robins,* he'd told Alfred, and he meant it. But could he welcome a civilian into his life? Someone oblivious to Bruce's... extracurricular activities?

It was a stupid idea. Batman couldn't have a kid.

Except Batman *did* have a kid. Dick was here almost three years before he knew. And when Bruce thought back to those early days—the clutter of toys around the manor, the sound of excited laughter in another room, the $28,000 Ming vase shattered by an errant softball—something on the other side of the bat symbol on his chest gave an almighty ache.

"Yes," he told Lillian, interrupting her mid-sentence. "I'll do it."

"Really? Oh, that's wonderful," she replied, and she sounded sincere. "Just call the office's main line tomorrow morning, and we'll re-activate the file. With a little luck, maybe you can meet him this

weekend."

Bruce smiled slightly at the slip-up and didn't bother to let on that he'd noticed. "That would be nice," he said instead.

Tim paced the tiny front porch, aware of the eyes that watched him from inside the townhouse— particularly, one small set of brown eyes that popped up around the edge of the curtain when he turned away and darted out of sight when he looked back.

He wondered if Moe Parnell would remember him when he was gone. Probably for a little while; Tim read something in a psychology textbook once about memory development in young kids. He remembered an experiment proving that six-year-olds could remember their first birthday party, but by the time they turned twelve, they couldn't anymore. So, chances were good that Moe would remember him for a few years before forgetting about Tim completely.

This seemed to be becoming a pattern in Tim's life.

If nothing else, Moe would ask after him for a day or two, which gave the kid a leg-up on the Drakes, really. Tim wondered what Nadine and Marcus would tell him when or if he asked. They were nice enough people, in their way, but had grown frustrated by Tim's 'poorly developed social skills,' 'moody nature,' and 'frequent disregard of curfew'. (He'd disregarded their email security, too, though they of course didn't know this.)

He'd lasted 29 days here; that was pretty good. But he'd suspected for the last six of those days that change was coming (hence hacking into the Parnells' email). The honeymoon phase had ended, he'd settled into a routine (that frequently involved sneaking out his bedroom window a little after midnight), and now they had grown tired of him, just like everybody else.

"We're sorry, Tim, but we just don't feel like it's a good fit," was how they'd put it after dinner last night. They seemed surprised when he emerged from his bedroom this morning, like they'd forgotten that he hadn't left yet.

At least they didn't argue when he made his own breakfast and washed his own dishes instead of chatting with them at the table. Instead of protesting his coffee consumption, Nadine dug an old plastic travel mug out of the cupboard and told him he could keep it. Its insignia was illegible from too many trips through the dishwasher,

and the inside was stained a sickly yellow with age, but it was the first gift Tim hadn't bought for himself in almost five years, and it was nice to be thought of.

He paused his pacing when a blue Honda Civic turned onto the street. With a wave towards Moe's wide eyes, Tim walked down the path from the porch, the backpack containing his most valuable possessions slung over his left shoulder, his newly acquired travel mug held tight in his right. By the time Lillian slowed down in front of the house, Tim was already stepping in between parked cars, to save her from having to double-park and possibly get a ticket.

"Good morning, Tim," she said, same as always, when he opened the passenger door.

"Hey, Lillian," he replied, same as always, as he slid inside and placed his backpack at his feet.

She smiled at him as he buckled his seat belt, and, for the first time in months, it actually seemed genuine. He almost asked her what was up, then decided not to. Most likely, she'd tell him everything he needed to know over the course of the car ride back to the main office. After all, they'd been through this routine enough times by now.

"Ready?" she asked, and Tim nodded.

Lillian checked her blind spot and pulled out into traffic. When she turned left instead of right at the stop sign, Tim frowned slightly, wondering about the change in route. Maybe there was construction ahead? It was summer, after all.

But then she took another wrong turn, and another. The main office was south-east of the Parnells' house, and Lillian was making her way steadily north and west. In fact— yes, she was following the quickest route to get out of the downtown core and onto the highway.

"Where are we going?" he asked finally.

Lillian didn't take her eyes off the road, but she smiled again. "Less than three minutes," she observed. "That's pretty impressive, Tim."

"I know the city," he said, slightly embarrassed. Lillian nodded.

"You sure do," she agreed. "To answer your question, we're on our way to meet someone interested in being your next foster parent."

“I knew that part,” said Tim.

He didn’t mean to sound so snippy. Somewhere inside his head, his father reminded him that nobody liked a know-it-all.

“Why aren’t we meeting them at the main office?” he asked, trying to soften his tone. *After all, this isn’t an interrogation,* his mother said with a derisive sniff.

“I just thought you might be more comfortable elsewhere,” Lillian answered. “If all goes well, you might even be able to stay over tonight.”

Tim blinked. “Wait, we’re going right to their house?”

“*His* house,” Lillian corrected him. “And yes.”

She merged seamlessly onto the four-lane highway that would take them out of Gotham proper and into— *no.* Tim recognized this route. He’d taken cabs out here so many times in the middle of the night; hell, he’d even walked it once or twice. It was only twelve miles.

Please don’t take me back there.

The voice in his head was his own this time, and louder than either of his parents’ ghosts.

“He’s your old neighbour, in fact,” Lillian was saying when Tim was finally able to listen again. “Maybe you even met him a few times? I’m sure you and your parents went to some of his parties.”

Tim felt a new kind of dread abruptly form in the pit of his stomach. “Bruce Wayne,” he said through numb lips.

Lillian looked over, sending him a quick, bright smile. “You’re one smart cookie, Tim,” she said. “I think he’ll like you.”

No. No, no, no, Tim thought. This could *not* be happening. Bruce Wayne wasn’t even registered as a foster parent with the State. He hadn’t been for more than eight months— not since his second son-slash-sidekick was killed overseas.

When did this happen? How had Tim missed it? He’d read the Parnells’ emails to Lillian, but nothing on Lillian’s end; there was no need, he’d thought. After all, he had full access to his entire file with the State. He’d gone through it all again just last night, and there was

nothing—*nothing!*—in there about Bruce Fucking Wayne volunteering to become his next foster parent.

(Language, Timothy, his mother scolded.)

Mr. Wayne had to know. There was no way he didn't, no way this was a coincidence. He must have deduced Tim's identity—*how??*—and now he'd cornered him.

But why? Tim had never (technically) done anything wrong. He just took photos. And shared them on a blog from time to time (regularly, every 6 to 14 days in a changing pattern to make it seem occasional). And, yes, once in a while (almost every night), he followed Batman through the city on his patrol routes (which Tim had determined through the use of an algorithm he wrote). And, every now and then, he got lucky and snapped pictures of criminal activity, which he then felt obligated (thrilled) to send to Commissioner Gordon anonymously.

And, okay, there was that one time at his parents' house when he was poking around and discovered a backdoor into Batman's hyper-secure network. But it wasn't like he used it! He was *sure* that he'd backed out without tripping any alarms. He'd even sent Gordon a note to pass along that contained the code required to plug the hole, and when he checked again a week later, the gap had been repaired.

Tim was *sure.* Tim was *careful.* There was no way Batman, AKA Tim's former neighbour, AKA Gotham's favourite billionaire playboy philanthropist Bruce Wayne could have *possibly* discovered Tim's identity.

But he did. He had to. Batman *always* knew.

Tim was *fucked.*

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Bruce meets Tim (again).

“You know, sir,” said Alfred, “when I returned from London, and you announced interest in fostering another child, I rather expected the child to be, well, a bit more child-like.”

“Are you saying you wanted a newborn?” Bruce asked.

When Bruce emerged from behind the clock in his office, he caught the wafting scent of freshly-baked cookies. He smiled to himself and rearranged the clock hands, then followed his nose downstairs to the kitchen. It, too, was spotless. On the gleaming counter was a wire rack lined with neat rows of chocolate chip cookies, and a shining silver tray waiting to collect them when they were cooled. The matching teapot sat beside it, with the cart nearby already loaded with cups, saucers, napkins, and spoons. On the stove, the kettle was heating.

“Ah, there you are,” he heard Alfred say from behind him. “I was just about to go down there and drag you up by your ear.”

Bruce smiled at the familiar threat. He gestured to the exceptionally clean room. “You didn’t have to do all this, you know. They probably won’t even come into the family wing of the house today.”

“You, of all people, should understand the impulse to be prepared for anything, Master Bruce,” said Alfred, as he placed tea bags in the pot.

Bruce tilted his head, conceding the point. Technically, there was a small chance that Timothy could spend the night here, if this afternoon’s meeting went well. Bruce was surprised by how much he was hoping the meeting would go well.

“Nervous?” asked Alfred. His ability to read Bruce like a book never ceased to amaze.

“A little,” Bruce admitted, since there was no point in denying it now. He waved a hand at his clothes. “Do you think I should change?”

Alfred’s keen eyes dropped, taking in Bruce’s outfit. He’d gone for something simple—a long-sleeved v-neck t-shirt paired with dark jeans and tan loafers—but now he was wondering if he should have

dressed up more. It was hard to know what Timothy would be expecting. The only times he'd seen the kid, it had been at black tie affairs.

"I think you look just fine," said Alfred as the tea kettle began to whistle. "Very appropriate, given the circumstances. But the better question is, do *you* think you should change?"

Bruce checked his watch. Lillian was due to arrive in less than ten minutes. "Not sure if I have time even if I did."

"Best to leave it as is, then," said Alfred easily. He turned off the stove and poured the boiling water from the kettle into the silver teapot, creating a column of steam that only abated when he replaced the lid. "You know, sir, when I returned from London, and you announced interest in fostering another child, I rather expected the child to be, well, a bit more child-like."

"Are you saying you wanted a newborn?" Bruce asked. He reached for a cookie, and Alfred idly swatted his hand away.

"Of course not," Alfred replied. He seemed to be concentrating on moving the cookies to the tray as an excuse to avoid Bruce's eye. "Only that I hope you are not setting yourself up for disappointment, Master Bruce."

Bruce would be lying if he said the thought hadn't occurred to him as well. After all, Timothy was almost 15. Best case scenario, Bruce would only have him for a few years until he aged out of the system. The chances of the arrangement becoming permanent were slim. Still, he'd read Timothy's complete file very carefully last night, and dug a little deeper into the Drakes when it left him with unanswered questions... and guilt.

How many times had his path crossed with theirs, and he never knew what they were putting their child through? Drake Manor was only a mile away; they were his closest neighbours. Everyone in Gotham's elite circles knew that Jack and Janet travelled a lot, but how many times had Bruce passed by that house assuming it was empty when, really, a young boy was living there all alone? It made him shudder, thinking of how long the Drakes had gotten away with abandoning their son before their housekeeper blew the whistle on them almost a year ago.

"Apologies, sir," said Alfred, which made Bruce realize he'd been trapped in his thoughts for several long seconds. "I didn't mean to

upset you."

"Not upset," Bruce reassured him. "Let's just see how this meeting goes before we start making long-term plans."

"Solid strategy as ever, Master Bruce," Alfred said. He placed the teapot on the cart alongside the cookies, and began to push it towards the kitchen door.

Bruce followed him out and down the hallway towards the public wing of the manor, tugging on his sleeves as he walked. His wrists and forearms still had traces of a rash—courtesy of one of Ivy's plants—and he didn't want to have to explain that to Lillian or Timothy if he could help it.

(He could, of course. He had a dozen convincing excuses ready to go, from literal poison ivy to contact dermatitis caused by cheap jewellery to an allergic reaction to a new fabric softener. As Alfred said, it was important to be prepared for the worst case scenario, but it was far easier to just avoid it altogether.)

When the doorbell rang, Alfred left the cart in one of the nooks in the hallway, then detoured to the front door. Meanwhile, Bruce carried on to the sitting room, where he would wait for Alfred to show their guests in.

The fancy rigmarole chafed at Bruce. He'd much rather introduce Timothy to the manor the same way that Dick and Jason were introduced— which was to say via the side door that led directly to the family wing, where the furniture was more comfortable and it actually looked like a place where people lived, instead of a museum. But chances were, Timothy would be expecting something formal like this. He'd been raised in high society even more than Bruce had been, and the kid that Bruce remembered meeting at various galas over the years was nothing less than a perfect little gentleman.

Finally, the sound of voices came filtering down the hall. Alfred said something with his usual dry wit, and a woman laughed. Timothy, for his part, was silent.

The sitting room door opened, and there was Lillian. Bruce hadn't seen her since their meeting to close out Jason's file, and he'd forgotten the warmth of her eyes, the size of her smile. He crossed the room with a smile of his own.

"Lovely to see you again, Ms. Bartlett," he told her, charming but

sincere, and shook her hand.

“Please, Mr. Wayne, call me Lillian,” she replied. “You’re hardly a stranger, after all.”

“Then stop calling me Mr. Wayne,” Bruce said. The exchange was familiar— he remembered having almost the exact same conversation three years ago.

Different kid, though, he thought, looking to the young man standing next to her. He was almost as tall as Lillian already, his limbs lean and lanky like only a teenager’s could be. A backpack with fraying straps was on his back, cutting dark stripes over his red t-shirt. His black hair hung almost to his ears, and his grey-blue eyes seemed focused on something over Bruce’s left shoulder.

“Hello,” Bruce said, extending the same hand to him. “Nice to meet you again, Timothy. It’s been a while.”

The kid’s flinch was subtle but unmistakable. Was it the offer of touch, Bruce wondered, or the name? Before he could react, Timothy pulled up a smile that looked practised and shook Bruce’s hand. His grip was almost as firm as Jack’s.

“It has,” he said, like they were old colleagues who’d just bumped into each other on the green. “Very nice to see you, Mr. Wayne.”

“Bruce,” Bruce corrected him gently.

Timothy swallowed, his perfect smile faltering just a touch. “Tim,” he said quietly, as he let the handshake drop. “I go by Tim now.”

“Tim,” Bruce repeated. “Welcome back to Wayne Manor. It probably seems a lot smaller than it did the last time you were here,” he went on, leading him and Lillian to the less-than-comfortable sofa in the centre of the room. “You must have been, what? Ten years old?”

“Something like that,” said Tim. “It was one of your foundation’s charity balls. We missed those the last few years, because my parents were travelling.”

Travelling, Bruce thought. *That was one way to put it.*

Lillian smiled at him, but it looked forced. Bruce motioned her towards the couch, and Tim sat down beside her a moment later, perching on the edge of the firm cushion. He couldn’t quite manage to

hide his grimace of discomfort before pushing back further, to where the seat was slightly softer. Bruce, for his part, settled in a wingback armchair near Tim's side of the couch.

"I think the last time you were here was the year that our string quartet cancelled last minute," Bruce said, trying to smooth over the awkwardness. "What a disaster."

"At least there wasn't food poisoning, like at the Silvermans' Thanksgiving banquet two years ago," Tim remarked, and Bruce let out a genuine laugh.

"Oh, yes, thank goodness," he agreed, pretending not to notice just how closely Lillian was watching this overly genteel exchange. "I heard that catering company went out of business within six months," he added, just to play it up a bit more.

"Frankly, I'm surprised it wasn't sooner," Tim said, and Bruce could hear Janet in every syllable.

The rattle of the tea cart announced Alfred's return. He poured the tea and passed it out. Lillian and Bruce thanked him politely, but Tim hesitated before accepting the cup, and didn't take a single sip. He did, however, eat three cookies over the course of the conversation, which Bruce found strangely reassuring. It was a reminder that Tim was a teenaged boy and not some bizarrely young professional at a corporate networking event.

Eventually, they came around to discussing the topic of why they were here. Bruce could tell that Lillian was keen but trying not to show it, like she didn't want to influence Tim's decision when she asked if he thought maybe he wanted to stay at the manor.

Bruce kept his expression open, too. Tim was not at all what he'd been expecting. Even accounting for best behaviour, Bruce had anticipated some sign of the kid who'd burned through ten foster homes in eleven months. He'd expected repressed anger or obvious resentment. He'd expected *attitude.* He'd expected...

Jason. He'd expected Jason.

Bruce blinked rapidly as the realization hit him. As subtly as possible, he reached for his teacup, using the last of its almost-bitter liquid to swallow the sudden lump in his throat.

Luckily, neither Lillian nor Tim seemed to notice as they discussed the

logistics of Tim leaving his current placement, and whether or not that would be feasible for tonight.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to impose on your hospitality, Mr. Wayne,” Tim began. Bruce frowned a little at the return to *Mr. Wayne*, but he didn’t interrupt. “I understand if you have already have plans for the night.”

There was a microscopic pause before he said *plans* that bothered Bruce, but he quickly shrugged it off. “It’s no imposition at all,” he said, with as much sincerity as he could muster without sounding phony. “I was prepared for the possibility that you might start your stay here tonight.”

He expected more waffling—the rules of politeness dictated that one turned down an offer at least twice before accepting—and he got it. “I can come tomorrow instead,” Tim said. “If that’s more convenient.”

“I’m happy to have you here tonight, Tim,” Bruce insisted, and, finally, Tim nodded.

“Thank you,” he said. He looked to Lillian for next steps, and Bruce noticed that Alfred had reappeared by the door, wearing a small, pleased smile.

“Okay, great,” said Lillian, beaming. “There’s just some paperwork I’ll need you to complete, Bruce.”

She pulled the documents from her bag and leaned forward to put them on the coffee table. As Bruce slid them across to look at them, Tim shifted on the uncomfortable couch. It was the first time he’d fidgeted since he arrived. Bruce felt a pang of sympathy, thinking of how frustrating it must be to have ‘the grown-ups’ sign him away right in front of him.

“Alfred, why don’t you take Tim to the family wing?” Bruce suggested. To Tim, he said, “Alfred can give you a tour and show you which of the rooms you can choose from. I’ll give you a hint,” he added with a smile, “it’s most of them.”

Tim’s tiny huff of laughter seemed to be the first real one of the day, and it pleased Bruce more than he wanted to let on.

“Right this way, Master Tim,” said Alfred, while Tim got to his feet and slid his backpack straps over his shoulder again. “You can also let me know what you like or don’t like to eat. If it’s in my power, we can

have some of your favourites for dinner tonight."

"Well, I'm allergic to shellfish, so not that," Bruce heard Tim say, right before the door swung shut behind them.

He turned back to find Lillian watching the door as well, a somewhat sad smile on her lips. He sent her a curious look, and she sighed, pulling her focus back to him.

"He's a good kid," she said. "But he's never had anybody in his corner, and it shows. He's not used to trusting people, so he's not very good at it."

I can relate, Bruce thought, but of course he didn't say that. "Well, hopefully we can keep him here long enough to see if that can change."

"Honestly, that's all I want for him," said Lillian. "If he can just have something stable, somebody he can count on, even if it's only till he turns eighteen... I think that would be really good for him."

Bruce nodded. "I agree," he said, and he turned his attention to the forms on the coffee table in a bid to make it happen.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Tim's first night at Wayne Manor is a little awkward.

Bruce (wait, was he actually referring to Batman by his first name now?) had seen right through him, Tim was sure. But, even after Lillian left, he didn't call Tim out on it. He didn't drag him up to the roof, either, and dangle him off the edge by his ankles, demanding that Tim tell him everything he knew. Not that Tim was really expecting that, but it was one of the contingencies he had to be prepared for, walking into Batman's house and all.

Tim shut his new bedroom door behind him and breathed a sigh of relief. He'd survived. By the skin of his teeth, maybe, but he'd survived. He'd never been more grateful for his parents' lessons in decorum.

(*Sit up straight, Timothy! Don't yawn where everyone can see you, you'll embarrass me.)*

(That handshake's a dead fish, son. The future CEO of Drake Industries can't very well go around giving people a dead fish, now can he? Think what they'd say about us!)

Tim wondered if they would be proud of him for charming one of Gotham's elite into taking him in. The thought made something twist inside him, first in his heart and then his stomach. He let it go before he could dwell too much on what that meant.

Bruce (wait, was he actually referring to Batman by his first name now?) had seen right through him, Tim was sure. But, even after Lillian left, he didn't call Tim out on it. He didn't drag him up to the roof, either, and dangle him off the edge by his ankles, demanding that Tim tell him everything he knew. Not that Tim was *really* expecting that, but it was one of the contingencies he had to be prepared for, walking into Batman's house and all.

And staying there, apparently. For a little while, anyway. Just until he could get the legal stuff sorted, or until he turned sixteen, whichever came first.

Lillian had gone with him to collect the rest of his meagre possessions

from the Parnells', chattering the entire way about how much better she thought it would be this time, how this home was going to work out for him, she *just knew it.* Tim guessed that she was projecting as much optimism as possible in the hope that it would rub off on him. So he put on the patented Drake Gala Smile again—the one that told the world that everything was okay even when it really, *really* wasn't —and agreed with her wholeheartedly.

She did make some good points, he supposed. Bruce Wayne, as the world knew him, was only a few parenting skills away from Jack Drake, and, on paper anyway, his lifestyle was certainly familiar. But now Tim was in a bedroom in Wayne Manor, a mile away from where he grew up, and just six doors down from where the frickin' Batman slept.

Speaking of, there was a gentle knock behind him. "Yeah?" said Tim, cautious.

"Dinner's ready," Bruce answered.

Tim glanced at the alarm clock by the bed. Right. Okay. Dinner. He could do dinner.

"I'll be right there," Tim said, and he gave himself thirty more seconds before he opened the door and stepped out.

The food was delicious. He'd told Alfred he liked mac and cheese—it was the first thing he thought of because he ate it so often—so he was expecting something from a box. Maybe paired with a burger and some broccoli or something. (Because vitamins.) Instead, there was a piece of chicken breast and a generous serving of green beans on his plate, alongside a small glass dish that was clearly fresh from the oven. The noodles were smothered in a crispy, buttery topping, and when he dug his fork in, the cheese pulled more than a slice of Gotham-style pizza.

He and Bruce ate together in the large formal dining room, and it was a bit awkward, the conversation stilted at times. But at least it felt real — a lot more real than the gala-adjacent chit-chat from before.

Bruce asked a lot of questions. He wanted to know what Tim liked to study in school, if he'd thought about college yet, what he liked to do in his free time. He even asked about Tim's stupid shellfish allergy.

And he seemed legitimately interested in hearing what Tim had to say, too. He *listened* and *nodded* and *contributed.* He suggested a show

at a local gallery when Tim told him he was an amateur photographer. When Tim mentioned wanting to learn how to develop an app, Bruce recommended a GCU course on coding that was open to anyone. He offered to pay for Tim's enrolment. (Tim told him he'd think about it, though he knew without a doubt that his skills were already advanced enough that it would be a waste of his time and Bruce's money.)

All in all, as far as dinnertime discussions went, it was intense, and it somehow felt more invasive than Tim's dangling-off-the-roof idea.

When there was finally a lull in the conversation, and he was done eating, Tim picked up his plate and cutlery to take them to the kitchen, but stopped when he noticed Bruce staring at him like he'd grown an extra head. Tim faltered, wondering what his problem was.

His mother gave him a clue. *Make yourself useful, Timothy!*

Right. Tim silently cursed himself and held out his other hand. "Take that for you?"

Bruce just blinked, his mouth hanging slightly open.

"I'm going anyway," Tim added in the uncomfortable silence.

Bruce recovered, pushing his chair back from the table and carrying his own dishes. "I'll follow you," he said, and wasn't *that* a weird thing for Batman to say.

"Oh, Master Tim," Alfred said in surprise, when Tim pushed through the kitchen door. "Is something wrong?"

"No," Tim answered. He glanced around the room, looking for the dishwasher. "Food was awesome, thanks. Where can I...?"

"Ah. Allow me," Alfred said, taking the dirty dishes from him at once. He sent Bruce a quick look that Tim couldn't read. "Thank you, my boy."

"Yeah, no problem," said Tim, then he paused by the door, wondering how best to make his escape. If not for summer break, he could blame homework; historically, that got his foster parents off his back. Maybe he could say he wanted a walk outside before the sun set?

"There's dessert if you're interested," said Bruce, after handing off his own dishes to Alfred.

“Apple pie and vanilla ice cream,” Alfred supplied. “You’re welcome to eat in here, or perhaps outside on the terrace?”

“Okay,” said Tim. Going outside now would give him a nice lead-in to the evening walk excuse; he would just have to double back inside once Bruce was preoccupied and shut himself away before he could get pulled into another conversation.

“Okay, which?” asked Bruce, sounding faintly amused.

“Oh,” said Tim, his cheeks heating. “Outside would be nice,” he added awkwardly.

“Excellent,” said Alfred, which seemed a little overkill in Tim’s estimation.

“Right through here, Tim,” said Bruce, leading the way to the back of the kitchen.

Tim started to follow, then hesitated. “Do you need me to carry something?” he asked Alfred.

“Thank you, but I’ll manage,” Alfred replied with a kind smile. “Go on, before it gets too cool to sit outside.”

Tim didn’t point out that they were currently in the middle of a heatwave. He just nodded and headed for the double doors that Bruce was about to open.

“Now, I should tell you, Tim,” he began, once they’d stepped out into the heat, “the security system comes on every night at midnight. Any exterior door that gets opened after that time will set the alarm off, and you’ll have thirty seconds to get to a keypad and enter your code.”

“Okay,” said Tim.

He wondered if this was Bruce setting a curfew. Probably. After all, the Parnells caught him coming home at 2 that one time, which was in his file with the State. And there was that other time with the Hudsons, when he was out till almost 4. And that other time with... hm, he couldn’t remember who now, but it really didn’t matter. The pictures he’d taken that night and sent to Commissioner Gordon—two men getting into an old Cadillac down by the harbour and only one getting out—led to someone from the Maroni family being arrested for murder two weeks later. That was way more important than breaking

some arbitrary rule, he thought.

“After dinner, I’ll get on the computer and set up your user profile,” Bruce continued as they took their seats at the glass patio table. “We should be able to create a code for you before you turn in tonight, but if not, we’ll do it first thing in the morning.”

Alfred emerged from the kitchen then with two plates, each bearing a slice of pie with a scoop of ice cream beside it. Tim’s, he noticed, was bigger than Bruce’s. He sent Alfred a questioning look, and he’d swear the older man winked when he handed Tim a fork.

“Would you like anything to drink with it?” he asked both of them. “Tea? Coffee?”

Tim desperately wanted to ask for some coffee, but Bruce declined, and Tim thought it was probably rude not to follow his lead.

The pie, unsurprisingly, was excellent. Way better than Mrs. Mac’s, though it had been more than a year since he’d had some to compare. It was really nice of Alfred, he thought, to make dinner and dessert for him. Tomorrow, he’d start pulling his own weight. (Surely, Batman’s butler had better things to do than feed some kid who probably wouldn’t be here very long.)

“Do you like to cook?” Bruce asked, like he knew what Tim was thinking about. “Or bake?”

Tim shook his head. “I tried making brownies once,” he answered. “Burned the chocolate in the microwave and nearly set fire to the kitchen. But I can cook okay. Been doing it for a while now.”

He didn’t add that, when Mrs. Mac started coming less often a few years ago, his options were learn how to feed himself, or starve. From the look in Bruce’s eye, he might have already been suspecting as much. Tim didn’t want Bruce’s pity, so he ducked his head and focused on his pie.

“Alfred can teach you if you want to learn more,” Bruce said after a pause. “He’s a good teacher, though he gave up on me years ago.”

Tim glanced up, genuinely curious, and Bruce told him a story that involved potatoes boiling dry and chicken that was black on the outside but somehow still raw enough on the inside that everyone got sick.

“I got a lifetime ban from the kitchen after that,” Bruce concluded. “Sometimes Alfred lets me have toaster privileges, but that’s about it.”

Tim’s laugh—because, honestly, *toaster privileges*—made Bruce grin. But before he could say anything more, there was an eruption of noise far off to Tim’s right.

It was a strange sound, like hundreds of dog toys squeaking. Tim turned and spotted a swarm of… something… swirling around the chimney of an old outbuilding near the edge of the ravine that ran through the back of the property.

“Are those…?” Tim started to ask. (There was no way. *No way.)*

“Chimney swifts,” Bruce replied. (Of course they weren’t. That’d be a little on the nose.) “They’re an endangered species, so I couldn’t get rid of them even if I wanted to, but it’s fine. Nobody uses the old carriage house anymore anyway.”

“They… nest there?” Tim asked. He found it hard to picture a house full of birds.

“In the chimney,” said Bruce, then he quirked his eyebrows. “Hence the name.”

“Makes sense,” Tim replied absently, turning back to watch the flock swooping like a black wave across the orangey-blue sky of summer twilight.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” Bruce said after a moment. “They come back to the chimney every night around this time in the summer. It’s something to see. I sit out here and watch them whenever I can.”

How, Tim thought, as the birds dipped and dived. *How is this guy, calmly watching endangered birds fly at sunset, the same guy who beats up criminals on the streets of Gotham at midnight?*

It made no sense. But, also, it made perfect sense. Because if Tim didn’t know any better, he wouldn’t suspect a thing.

Alfred caught his eye as Bruce opened the terrace door and stepped into the welcome air-conditioning of the kitchen. As he came over to take the dirty plates, he looked expectantly over Bruce’s shoulder.

“Aren’t you missing someone, sir?” he asked.

“Tim said he wanted to go for a walk before it got dark,” Bruce explained.

Now that the dishes were out of his hands, he gave in to the urge to rub at his wrists and forearms. Under his long sleeves, the rash was itchy with sweat, and it had taken a lot of self-control not to scratch in front of Tim.

“Are you sure that’s wise?” said Alfred, watching his movements.

“No,” Bruce admitted, but he grimaced as pushed up his sleeves. As expected, the skin was red and irritated, peppered with tiny hives. “I’ll put some calamine on it, so it’ll stop.”

Alfred frowned slightly but let Bruce walk out of the room without a word. When he returned ten minutes later, his skin pink with dried lotion and already feeling better, Alfred was finished with the dishes and looking out onto the back terrace, where the darkness was quickly deepening.

“I meant, are you sure it’s wise to let Tim wander the grounds,” he said, like there’d been no pause in their conversation at all.

“Oh,” said Bruce, with some embarrassment. He shook his head. “It’s all right. There’s nothing he can really find out there. I sealed off all the other entrances to the Cave years ago.”

“I remember,” said Alfred, “but that wasn’t actually my concern.”

“Oh,” Bruce said again, with the distinct impression that he was dropping the ball tonight.

“I was more worried about how six of his foster carers reported that he’d left the home after dark without permission,” Alfred continued. He paused, then added softly, “Feels rather familiar, doesn’t it?”

Bruce sighed and sank into a chair, thinking of the red flag on Jason’s official documentation that labelled him a flight risk. Bruce had spent many restless nights considering that label, that warning, and how arrogant he’d been to think that a costume and a mission had cured Jason of the urge to leave it all behind. Bruce had been foolish and short-sighted, and his mistakes had cost his son his life.

Not for the first time since Lillian’s phone call last week, Bruce had a moment of doubt, wondering if he was really ready for this. If he wasn’t, Tim would pay the price, and Bruce wasn’t sure he’d be able to

live with himself if he caused this kid—this innocent—more pain.

“He came back every time, though,” he said, forcing himself out of his brooding thoughts. “He was late, and he got in trouble, but at the end of the day— or, the night, I guess, he always came home.”

Alfred hummed thoughtfully, then smiled. “That feels familiar, as well. To me, anyway.”

Bruce smiled back at his mentor, his oldest friend. “Yes,” he said. “I suppose it would.”

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

> Bruce has a problem. Alfred proposes a solution. Tim still doesn't drink his tea.
>
> *"We should strike while the iron's hot, Bruce," Clark reminded him.*
>
> *"I know," Bruce sighed. "It's just... really not a good time for me to take a business trip right now."*

Less than a week into Tim's stay at the manor, Bruce got some distressing news.

"And there's no way you can do this without me?" he said, pausing his pacing. At this rate, he'd wear a groove in the Batcave floor in no time.

"Lex Luthor thinks he can trust Bruce Wayne," Superman replied over the vidcomm. "And, more importantly, he thinks he can outsmart you. We have an opportunity to find out what's really going on at LexCorp, but you might be the only one who can get close enough to pull this off."

Bruce blew out a breath and ran a hand through his hair. He knew Clark was right. LexCorp had been looking to broker a deal with Wayne Enterprises for almost a decade, and Bruce's excuses for turning him down were getting thinner and thinner. Yesterday, Luthor made an off-hand comment about this struggle in an interview, which blew up all over social media to the point that the press was taking notice. Clark had just shown him the headline that the *Daily Planet* was going to run in the business section tomorrow, all about Luthor and Wayne's so-called feud.

Normally—which is to say, when ex-employees from LexCorp's science division *weren't* turning up dead in Gotham's back alleys—Bruce would just wait for it all to blow over, but this time, that didn't seem to be an option.

"We should strike while the iron's hot, Bruce," Clark reminded him.

"I know," Bruce sighed. "It's just... really not a good time for me to take a business trip right now."

“Why?” Clark asked, then the corners of his mouth tilted up. “You’re not going golfing again, are you?”

Bruce huffed a laugh and shook his head. A few weeks ago, he very publicly and very badly lost a charity golf tournament while wearing a hideous purple tartan Tam o’Shanter topped with the biggest golden-yellow pom pom that Alfred could find at the discount fabric store. It had been a media circus, which was exactly the intention. Gossip rags, late night talk show hosts, and the internet in general were all over it. (Dick was still posting a new Bruce Wayne Fails Golf meme online almost every day.)

“Then what is it?” Clark pressed.

Bruce hesitated. Superman was the only member of the Justice League who knew Bruce’s secret identity and that Robin—both of them—was his son. As such, he was the only person in the world, aside from Alfred and Dick, who truly knew what Bruce (and Batman) had lost last year in Ethiopia.

Jason’s death had hit Clark surprisingly hard. How would he react to the news that Bruce was fostering again? Would he warn Bruce against taking another protégé? Would he even believe Bruce when he told him that he had no intention of training Tim as the next Robin?

Bruce couldn’t predict what he would say, and the conversation was too much to deal with at the moment. It also felt too soon for Bruce to share details about Tim with anyone outside the immediate family. After all, the longest Tim had stayed in one place over the last year was 49 days, and he was only on day 4 at Wayne Manor.

“There’s just a lot going on around here,” Bruce answered finally. “It’s kind of a delicate time.”

“Oh.” Clark got that look about him, the caring, sympathetic look that made Superman such a media darling. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Thank you, Kal, but I have it under control,” Bruce answered, in a tone that said, very politely, *butt out.*

Clark nodded his understanding, as Bruce knew he would. “Well, we may not get another chance to investigate Luthor and LexCorp like this,” he said. He shrugged. “Then again, we might. I think we should act now, but I’ll leave it in your hands.”

“Thank you,” Bruce said again, and they disconnected the call a few minutes later.

He stared at the blank screen of the Batcomputer for a moment, then opened the web browser and pulled up a search bar. Bruce scrolled through the results— news article after news article speculating about why his company refused to deal with LexCorp despite numerous possible advantages. Bruce watched Luthor’s interview again, and, as much as it pained him to admit it, Luthor was good. He had the host and the studio audience eating out of his hand. Nearly every sentence he uttered about a possible deal with Wayne Enterprises was a perfect sound bite, and social media was taking full advantage of that. Bruce found short inspirational videos idolizing Luthor—mostly from business students, of course—as well as longer breakdowns of the massive blunder that WE was making. (Pictures from the recent golf tournament made more than one appearance, naturally.)

His work was interrupted by the rattle and whir of the door. Bruce glanced at the clock, relieved to find that he’d only been down here a little more than an hour. It was tea time, not dinner. Not yet.

“I’m on my way,” he said when Alfred reached the foot of the stairs, but there were still a couple of minutes left on the video he was watching. Alfred came to stand behind him, and they watched the last bit together.

“Rather scathing,” he commented when it was over.

“But not completely uncalled-for,” said Bruce, closing the browser window and putting the computer into standby.

“I take it you’ll be travelling to Metropolis, then?”

Bruce sighed and got to his feet. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I should. I even want to. There might be no other way to find out what’s going on at LexCorp. And that’s important to the Justice League. Very important.”

“But?” Alfred prompted.

“But there’s a teenager upstairs whose parents went on never-ending business trips and left him all alone for weeks at a time,” Bruce said. He shook his head. “I can’t be another person like that in his life. That’s important, too.”

“It is,” Alfred agreed, with a tone that meant he had more to say.

It was Bruce's turn to do the prompting when he didn't go on. "But?"

"But, if you left him here, you wouldn't be leaving him all alone," Alfred said reasonably. "I'm here. And you certainly wouldn't be gone for *weeks,* now would you?"

"A couple of days, at most," Bruce conceded, then he realized what Alfred had said. "What do you mean, *if I left him here?* Are you suggesting I bring him with me?"

"Why not?" asked Alfred, shrugging his narrow shoulders.

"Well, it might not be safe," Bruce replied. "I'm going to meet with Lex Luthor."

"As Bruce Wayne," Alfred reminded him. "Not as Batman. This might be the only trip you've ever taken for the Justice League that's almost guaranteed not to end in violence."

"That is true," Bruce admitted.

Thinking about it a little more, he realized he'd been worried about Tim not feeling welcome or included, which was a large factor in not wanting to go away without him. But he could see it now: this trip could be an opportunity to show Tim that things would be different here, that he wasn't going to be treated like he was with his parents. And, as much as Bruce didn't want to get his hopes up—Luthor could be too busy for a meeting, Tim could be uninterested in going, or any number of pressing matters could come up here in Gotham—he felt a smile stretch across his lips at the possibility.

"I think that's a wonderful idea, Alfred," he said.

"I know it is," Alfred said smugly. "But really, you should discuss it with Master Tim." He cocked his head pointedly towards the stairs. "Over tea."

Bruce huffed but didn't argue. He knew when he was beaten. "Are we sure he'll be joining us?" he asked as they headed up.

"I haven't invited him yet," Alfred replied. "I thought it best to let you get settled in your study before doing so, seeing as that's where I said you would be when you were working from home this afternoon. But given the circumstances, perhaps you should extend the invitation yourself."

“I will,” said Bruce gratefully. “What’s he been up to today?”

Tim had been something of a ghost since his first night at the manor, and Bruce and Alfred had agreed it was best to give him a little space to settle in before spending some quality time together on the weekend.

Which, Bruce thought hopefully, a spontaneous trip to Metropolis might provide.

“Well, he slept in,” Alfred answered. “Then he asked me where to find the laundry room when he got up. I told him I’d be happy to take care of his clothes for him, but he was quite insistent. He’s been in there running the machines and hanging out on his computer ever since.”

“No lunch?” asked Bruce. It was obvious, after his first night at the manor, that Tim was uncomfortable in the dining room, so since then, meals had been a lot more informal and always in the kitchen or on the terrace.

“I asked him to join me for some soup at noon,” said Alfred, sounding slightly offended. “But he declined. Said he wasn’t hungry.”

“Hm,” said Bruce, because that was concerning.

“But I believe he emerged at some point later and made himself a sandwich,” Alfred continued. “The sink and sponge were wet as though someone had washed a dish, and I noticed the lid to the peanut butter jar was slightly askew, while I distinctly remember putting it on properly after you had your breakfast this morning.”

“Good detective work, Alfred,” Bruce said with a faint laugh.

“Why, thank you, sir.”

Fifteen minutes later, all three of them were seated at the table on the terrace. The heat wave from earlier in the week had finally broken, and a fresh-scented breeze cooled Bruce’s tea as he raised it to his lips. Across the table from him, Tim was on his second blueberry scone, while his teacup sat untouched.

Bruce glanced at Alfred for reassurance, who nodded. “So, Tim,” he said with a smile. “I wanted to run something by you, if I could.”

Tim nodded and swallowed hurriedly. He sounded a little nervous

when he said, “Okay.”

“I might need to go to Metropolis and stay for a day or two on business,” he began, but Tim interrupted him before he could go on.

“You’re not caving to Lex Luthor, are you?”

Surprised, Bruce set his cup down on its saucer. “I take it you saw his interview yesterday.”

“Yeah, I saw it,” Tim scoffed. “You know he’s just making noise, right?”

“Noise?” Bruce repeated, intrigued.

Encouraged, Tim went on. “Yeah. LexCorp’s medical devices can’t hold a candle to yours. Hell, even Drake Industries has had better luck with surgical mesh and pacemakers.”

“Really?” said Bruce. He hadn’t kept up with DI lately.

“Of course,” said Tim, like it was obvious. He was gathering steam now, becoming more animated than Bruce had ever seen him. “LexCorp got into medical tech two years ago, right after some pretty significant breakthroughs. But the science has slowed down now, because that’s what science does, and Luthor’s pissed off about it.”

Which could provide a possible motive for murdering his former employees, Bruce added silently.

“So he’s bluffing, trying to bring you in on a deal. Probably hoping he can poach your Applied Science division and make up for lost time,” Tim concluded with a shrug.

“That would make sense,” Bruce murmured. However, what Tim didn’t know was that WE’s Applied Science division wasn’t actually doing work in medical devices; it was a bucket for funding Batman.

Was it possible that Luthor had caught wind of something? Maybe he was trying to lure Bruce into making a deal because he wanted a closer look at Wayne Enterprises and the Applied Science division as much as Bruce wanted a closer look at LexCorp. Bruce had been so distracted by the murdered scientists that the thought hadn’t actually occurred to him, even though it should have.

He’d have Lucius double-check everything right away, he decided, just

in case. It would be best to make sure that there was nothing that would raise any suspicions if someone like Luthor did happen to stumble on it.

“Even if it didn’t make sense,” Tim said, “you shouldn’t sign anything with Luthor. He’s fucking evil.”

He punctuated the sentence with a rather aggressive bite of his scone. Bruce, his eyebrows raised, exchanged another look with Alfred.

“Please excuse me,” Alfred said softly, rising from his seat. “I’ll be right back.”

Tim’s eyes followed Alfred as he passed through the door back into the kitchen. His cheeks darkened. “Sorry,” he said, still chewing. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No,” Bruce had to admit. “Not at all. Thank you, Tim.”

Tim frowned. “For what?”

Bruce was spared having to answer that question because Alfred returned, clutching a familiar washed-out pickle jar with a label that was handwritten and faded. Bruce had no idea where Alfred had stashed it, but he hadn’t seen it in almost a year. Without Jason, they hadn’t needed it.

“This is the swear jar,” Bruce told Tim. His smile only hurt a little. “Alfred keeps it on the counter. Minor swears will cost you a dollar, f-bombs are three.”

“Oh,” said Tim, looking very chagrined now.

“Don’t worry, I’ll cover you today,” said Bruce, pulling out his wallet. He stuck a five through the slot in the lid. “At the end of every month, we donate it. Whoever put the most money in the jar gets to choose the charity.”

“Which is *not* an incentive to swear more,” Alfred added quickly, and Bruce laughed, suddenly remembering the time when Jason used that as an excuse.

“No,” he agreed. “It sure as hell isn’t,” he said on purpose, then added another single to the jar.

Alfred nodded, pleased, and headed back inside.

“Now,” said Bruce more seriously, after he’d put away his wallet. “What I was *going* to say, was that I might have to take a business trip to Metropolis for a few days.”

Tim nodded. His face had become somewhat mask-like— similar to the one he’d worn at their first meeting, but he wasn’t smiling this time. Instead, he looked serious and older. Responsible enough to be trusted alone, Bruce realized.

“And I wanted to ask if you’d like to come with me,” he concluded, his heart aching for the kid.

Tim didn’t answer, but the mask disappeared, replaced by mild surprise.

“Depending on how things go with Luthor, I’ll be tied up for a few hours each day with work,” Bruce went on. “But we can hang out around my meetings, and stay for the weekend. Do some sightseeing, check out some museums, maybe go to the amusement park?” He shrugged, a little awkwardly, in the wake of Tim’s continued silence. “Whatever you like.”

“I— okay,” Tim said.

“Okay?” Bruce repeated with a hopeful smile.

“Yeah,” said Tim with more certainty. He smiled, and although it was still a bit cautious, it was genuine. “I’d like that.”

“Great,” Bruce said honestly. He picked up his tea again, and reminded himself to bring Alfred back an expensive souvenir as thanks.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Bruce asks Tim to research fun things to do while they're in Metropolis. Tim struggles to find the right answer.

"La Bohème is playing at the Royal Opera House," he blurted out. "If you like opera."

Bruce raised an eyebrow. "Do you like opera, Tim?"

Tim didn't understand. Was that a threat? Was Bruce going to make him eat his words if he said yes? His heart was starting to pound.

"If you want to see it, we can go," he said, sidestepping the question.

"Okay," Bruce said again, but he sounded doubtful now.

Tim was really screwing this up. What did Bruce want from him?

Chapter Notes

As I mentioned before, I don't believe in leaving apologies in the author's notes, but, after reading some of your lovely speculative comments (thank you!!) on Chapter 4, I do want to take a moment to remind everyone that I have read maybe two issues of Superman in my entire life, and I know very little about Lex Luthor. This story is not meant to be a Batman/Justice League case fic where Tim helps take down LexCorp, so if you were hoping for that, I hope you won't be disappointed.

Also, just putting this out there as well: this story will not become a Tim/Conner fic. (If it's a Tim/anyone fic, it's a Tim/coffee fic.) Again, I hope you won't be disappointed.

Also, *also,* you may have noticed some new tags, specifically about past verbal/emotional abuse and panic attacks. Fair warning: you may find the content in this chapter distressing if you have a history with those topics, so please take care.

Anyway, here's Wonderwall Chapter 5.

After dinner and helping Alfred with the dishes, Tim hopped on his

computer as usual, but, at Bruce's suggestion, he brought his laptop out to the terrace instead of shutting himself in his bedroom. The change of scenery meant that Tim couldn't research Lex Luthor and his feud with Bruce Wayne like he'd originally planned to do tonight, but that was okay. Instead, he decided he would look into events and activities going on in Metropolis this weekend, just in case this trip actually did happen.

(It wasn't that Tim didn't believe Bruce. It was just that Tim understood that business trips were first and foremost about, well, business. Things came up. A meeting that was supposed to last two hours—*And then we'll go to a Yankees game, son!*—could turn into an all-day affair, and suddenly Tim was unpacking his suitcase in his room again because, *You wouldn't have had any fun in New York, anyway*. Or, a once-in-a-lifetime dig was bumped up because monsoon season was forecast to start early this year, and *We have to get the next flight out, Timothy, and you know you can't miss school if you want to keep your average up.* Even trips that weren't supposed to be business trips could turn into business trips at the last minute. Like when they were supposed to go to Florida for his eighth birthday, and something happened at the DI office in London. Tim broke the rules about online shopping while his parents were gone, ordering himself a pair of knock-off Mickey Mouse ears. He then spent the next two weeks in a cold sweat... only for his parents to pay the credit card bill without even noticing.)

So he was trying not to get his hopes up. Especially since he couldn't figure out why Bruce would want to make a deal with Lex Luthor in the first place. Tim didn't know much about Luthor, except that he had a reputation for being a ruthless businessman, and his company was involved in some shady sh— *stuff.* Weapons manufacturing, mostly. Tim supposed that might be reason enough for the Justice League to investigate him. There were also rumours that he hated Superman. Tim had heard his own father repeat these rumours at society events over the years. Buried in praise, of course, because Jack Drake was always ready and willing to fawn over anyone in power who might get him or his company a leg up.

The apple had clearly fallen very far from the tree, Tim thought, remembering how he'd spoken to Bruce before dinner. (He'd *rambled.* And *swore.*) Why hadn't Bruce shut him up? It wasn't as if Bruce didn't already know about LexCorp and their failed attempts to penetrate the medical devices industry. For all that Bruce played dumb in public, he always made smart business decisions when it counted. And still, Tim had practically lectured him about what to do with his own company.

He sighed and tried to swallow his embarrassment, deciding to focus on the problem at hand. Bruce had asked him to find things to do in Metropolis this weekend. If they actually made it there, Tim would need to have an answer ready.

('I don't know,' is not an answer, Timothy.)

To his surprise, Tim had only been on the Metropolis Tourism Board's website for a few minutes when Bruce came back outside, carrying his own laptop. Tim felt a flash of panic—

(because he was right fucking— frickin' there, sorry Alfred, and Tim's hard drive was full of pictures of Batman and information on his patrol routes and case files that Tim had liberated from the GCPD's servers, and ohmigod he was so screwed)

—but Bruce just smiled that gentle, very not-Batman smile and settled into the seat opposite Tim at the table. He opened his laptop, turned down the brightness of the monitor, and started to work on... whatever it was he was working on.

Tim let out the breath he was holding and re-focused on his trip research. Metropolis had a lot to offer, apparently. Like one of the best aquariums in the country, and there was the zoo, of course. Maybe they could do a bus tour? No, he decided. That would be too corny, especially for Bruce, who'd probably been to the city dozens of times already. Maybe he would like the opera? Tim definitely wouldn't. There was a one-day pass that gave admission to five museums, which seemed like a good option... until Tim realized that he really only wanted to go to one of them, and the price of the pass wasn't much of a deal compared to the general admission. Unless Bruce would like to do more—?

A mosquito suddenly whined close to his ear, and Tim swatted it away frantically. His knee hit the table leg in the process, jostling it with a loud thump.

"Ow," Tim muttered, and Bruce looked up.

"Everything all right over there?"

"I hate bugs," Tim answered.

"Ah." Bruce went back to his work.

Tim was about to do the same when something caught his eye off to

his right. He turned, expecting the flock of birds he'd seen the other night, but the sun had already set; the birds were already back in their roost. This was something else, and Tim couldn't hold back a smile as he realized what he was looking at.

The bats' wings flapped almost too fast to see. When they dived, no doubt chasing the mosquitoes that were bothering Tim so much, they appeared as if from nowhere. Tim stared, hypnotized by the tiny black angular shapes against the deepening blue sky, unable to look away until the light had faded almost too much to see them at all.

"That's so cool," he murmured, forgetting for a moment who was sitting across from him at the table.

Bruce didn't say a word.

Eventually, Tim's focus was broken by another mosquito, this time biting his thigh. He smacked at it—and missed—then decided he'd had enough of the outdoors. He closed his laptop and stood up.

"I'm heading in," he announced. It was probably unnecessary, but it seemed rude to just leave without saying anything.

"I'll be right behind you," said Bruce. There was a noticeable increase in his typing speed.

Tim nodded and went to the door, but paused for one last look at the bats—and the Bat—before he stepped inside. Being at Wayne Manor still felt pretty surreal. He wondered if he would be here long enough for it to seem normal.

He was planning to pass through the kitchen and go straight to his bedroom, but then he spotted the plate of cookies on the table. They were chocolate chip, the same kind that Alfred had served on the first day he was here, with Lillian. He glanced around, but Alfred was nowhere in sight. So, either he'd left these cookies out by accident, or they were an invitation, as clear as a flashing neon sign.

Tim decided to take it. He sat in his usual spot at the table—with his back to the counter and within arm's reach of the cookies—and opened his laptop again.

A moment later, Bruce entered, stopping as if he was surprised by Tim's presence. Or maybe it was—

"Ooh, cookies," said Bruce. He set his computer down opposite Tim

then walked over to the counter. “Would you like some tea?” he asked from the other side of the room. “I’m gonna make some for myself anyway.”

Why is everyone in this house obsessed with tea? Tim wondered, but out loud, he simply said, “No, thank you.”

“Okay,” Bruce answered easily.

The sound of him filling the kettle made a not-unpleasant soundtrack as Tim read about some of Metropolis’ other tourist attractions. He’d ended up in the Arts and Culture section, and clicked on the links for theatres to see what was playing. While the tea kettle started to hiss behind him, he skimmed a few plot summaries, but nothing really jumped out as something he thought Bruce would want to see. He closed the tabs and went back to the Tourism Board’s main page.

“Superman spotting tours?” said Bruce suddenly, *way* too close.

Tim gasped—okay, he practically shrieked—and jumped about a mile.

“Sorry,” said Bruce quickly. He laid a hand on Tim’s shoulder, then seemed to think better of it and took it away. “Shit. I’m so sorry, Tim. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Tim nodded, willing his heart rate and breathing to slow down. “I know,” he said, because he did know. But there was a big difference between knowing that Bruce Wayne was a pretty nice guy with a quiet tread and actually experiencing the Batman sneaking up on him.

Bruce pulled out the chair beside him and sank into it. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Tim told him, finally breathing normally again. “Don’t worry about it. I just startle easily. Always have.”

This didn’t seem to reassure Bruce. If anything, he looked more troubled.

So Tim forced a smile and said, “Swear jar.”

Bruce blinked once, then understood. “Swear jar,” he agreed.

He got to his feet and pulled his wallet out of his pocket. The tea kettle started to whistle as he went to the counter and dutifully slid a dollar bill into the jar.

Tim turned and went back to his research while Bruce continued making his tea. Tim could tell that he was being louder than usual—clattering silverware in the drawer, clinking mugs together as he pulled one down from the cupboard. He even shuffled his feet as he walked back to the table. Which was oddly considerate, especially since Bruce was in his own house. He would have been well within his rights to tell Tim to suck it up and adapt.

"So, I just sent some emails to Mr. Luthor's assistant," Bruce told him, once he was seated across from Tim with his tea. "She scheduled an appointment for 9 on Friday morning, and said Luthor would be available to meet with me again on Saturday if needed."

Tim nodded. He was waiting for Bruce to tell him the rest—that this meant Tim couldn't come along after all—but Bruce reached for a cookie and said something different.

"Since the meeting is so early on Friday, I figure we can take the train up tomorrow evening and stay over, make a long weekend of it. I'd like to be home in time for family dinner on Sunday, but if there's something you really want to see in Metropolis that night, I can tell Dick to come next weekend instead. He's excited to meet you, but I'm sure he'd understand."

Tim had to force his eyes away from Bruce's face, since it was probably getting creepy, the way he was staring. But he couldn't help it. Bruce had not only *not* said the thing Tim was expecting him to say, he'd said a bunch of other things that didn't make a lot of sense. Things like *long weekend, family dinner,* and, oh yeah, *Dick.* As in *Dick Grayson,* AKA the original Robin, AKA Tim's childhood hero and the reason he was able to deduce Batman's identity before he turned ten. Somehow, Tim had failed to take into account until this very second that having Batman as a foster parent meant having Nightwing as a sort-of brother.

If Bruce noticed Tim's inner turmoil, he didn't comment on it. Instead, he bit into his cookie and asked, "Did you find some things for us to do while we're in Metropolis?"

"Uh, I think so," Tim answered with only a slight delay to get his brain back on track. "The aquarium looks really cool, and uh, the Museum of Technology has a special exhibit about Louis Le Prince."

Bruce nodded. "Okay," was all he said, but for some reason, it sent a stab of anxiety through Tim's chest like a splinter.

“He’s a French inventor who went missing in the late 1800s,” he explained. He could hear himself talking faster and didn’t know how to stop it. “He made moving pictures before Thomas Edison, and he was on his way to get the patent sorted out when he disappeared. He got on a train and never got off. Nobody ever found his body or any of the papers he had with him. He was just gone.”

“Huh,” said Bruce, and, if Tim was feeling like himself, he’d probably be disappointed in this reaction from the World’s Greatest Detective. As it was, however, he felt cold, though he couldn’t think why.

“*La Bohème* is playing at the Royal Opera House,” he blurted out. “If you like opera.”

Bruce raised an eyebrow. “Do *you* like opera, Tim?”

Tim didn’t understand. Was that a threat? Was Bruce going to make him eat his words if he said yes? His heart was starting to pound.

“If you want to see it, we can go,” he said, sidestepping the question.

“Okay,” Bruce said again, but he sounded doubtful now.

Tim was really screwing this up. What did Bruce *want* from him? What was it he’d suggested outside? Right, the amusement park. It figured that Batman would love roller coasters.

“And Adventure Zone, of course,” he added. “They have lots of rides. And a pool, I think.”

Bruce’s reaction to this was subtle—not much more than a crease between his eyebrows—but Tim tensed up nonetheless. He forced his shoulders to rise, then fall in what he hoped resembled a casual shrug.

“Whatever you want to do is fine,” he said, hoping that he’d finally landed on the right answer. But when he chanced a look, Bruce’s frown was more pronounced than ever.

“Tim,” Bruce said, and Tim braced himself. He heard Bruce get up from the table, which was how he realized his eyes were closed and forced them back open.

When the chair next to him moved, he hunched his shoulders. He didn’t mean to. He didn’t want to—*Sit up straight, Timothy!*—but he’d always been a disappointment when it counted.

“Tim?” Bruce said again, more softly. “Hey, Tim? Talk to me. What’s going on?”

Tim felt his lips press together like they’d been sealed with glue. He’d closed his eyes again somehow, and now he couldn’t even answer a simple question, for God’s sake. *(What the hell’s the matter with you, boy? You always know so much, but now you got nothing to say?)*

“Tim, take a breath,” someone said. “Come on. In, 2-3-4.”

Tim managed to inhale around 2, but it caught before he could get to 4. (*How stupid are you, you can’t even breathe right?)*

“Try again,” said the voice that wasn’t in his head. “We’ll do it together, okay? In... and out, 2-3-4. There you go. Come on, let’s do some more.”

It got easier with a few tries. He recognized Bruce’s voice when he next spoke, and after a moment, he managed to open his eyes.

“Sorry,” was the first thing he said.

“You don’t have anything to apologize for,” Bruce replied, which was a kind thing to say but definitely a lie. “Do you want to talk about what happened?”

Tim shook his head, embarrassed— no, *mortified* was more like it. And angry at himself. He could have handled it on his own. He *should* have handled it on his own. He hadn’t lost it like that in front of another person in years.

“I’m fine,” he said, hoping that it would make Bruce stop looking at him like he was something fragile. (It didn’t.)

Tim reached over and closed his laptop—still open to the fucking Metropolis Tourism Board website—and got to his feet. Without looking Bruce in the eye, he said he was tired and going to bed.

It was a relief when Bruce didn’t stop him.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

> Bruce deals with the aftermath of Tim's panic attack in a very mature and responsible manner. Tim stays up way too late doing the same.
>
> *Batman hadn't planned to do any patrols this week. He'd thought he could get away with staying in for Tim's first week. Because that's what good parents do: they drop prior commitments when their kids need them. And Bruce may not be a great parent, but he thought he could at least try to be good. He thought he could pull it off for a week, if nothing else. But no.*

Chapter Notes

> I wasn't going to post early, but there's a snowstorm coming, and I think I'm getting sick, so what the hell, why not. Also, what kind of monster would I be if I left poor Tim panic-stricken for a full week??

Well, that could have gone better, Batman thought, as the butt end of the robber's shotgun connected with his chin. It was a lucky strike, a last-ditch effort by a man with nowhere to run, but it caught Batman by surprise, and he stumbled back half a step.

The robber may have been lucky, but he wasn't skilled: he didn't land a single other punch or kick. It didn't take long for Batman to knock the fight out of him entirely. He dismantled the shotgun and zip-tied the man's wrists behind his back, then turned him around and reached into the front left pocket of his leather jacket.

The robber squirmed in his grasp. "Hey! What the hell are you doing?"

Batman didn't answer, except to pull a shiny bracelet out of the man's pocket. He then looped another tie through the handcuffs, securing him to a No Parking sign, and walked away. He didn't need to wait for the police; his scanner said they would arrive in less than a minute.

"So you rob the robbers, huh?" the man taunted him as he headed down the alley back towards the street. "Hypocrite! I see you, Batman! You're no better than the rest of us! And when I get outta Blackgate,

I'm coming for you! You hear me? I'll—"

"Oh, will you shut up already!" someone yelled from above them. "Batman kicked your ass, get over it!"

Batman glanced up and spotted a man on a tiny second-storey balcony. He had his phone out, no doubt recording everything. Batman made a mental note to scour social media for the footage later and scrub it if he could.

The robber shouted something back up at the bystander, but Batman tuned the argument out as he rounded the corner. A police cruiser passed him going towards the alley, chirping its siren as if in thanks, but Batman kept walking, heading back to the all-night convenience store that he'd chased the robber away from just five minutes earlier. In his hand, he still carried the bracelet he'd taken from the man's pocket.

Anyone who knew anything about jewellery could tell at a glance that it was cheap— rhinestones and nickel, not even sterling silver. But Gotham's petty criminals weren't known for their discerning eye. Batman had watched from across the street as the robber threatened the young clerk with his shotgun until she took it off. Batman had heard her beg him not to take it. She'd protested that it wasn't worth anything, that it had been a birthday present from her little brother, who'd saved up from his allowance to buy it. The robber had called her a liar and demanded it anyway.

Just because he could. Because he had a gun, and he'd made her afraid.

Batman paused to adjust the light sensitivity in his lenses before going inside. It was still too bright under the harsh fluorescent bulbs, but he saw the clerk's head pop up from behind the counter as the door chime rang throughout the store. When she saw who it was, she stood up completely. Her hair was frizzy, her eyes red, her face stained with tear tracks. The name on her name tag—Candice—was surrounded by tiny pink, blue, and purple heart stickers.

Batman couldn't believe how young she was. Not much older than Tim, probably the same age Jason was when... the same age as Jason.

Why was she working so late, all alone, in this part of town? Where was her boss, her parents? Batman vowed to keep an eye on this store, to see if the robbery resulted in any changes in store policy about kids —because that's what she was—working alone at night. If not, then he

might have to have a word with management.

He set the bracelet on the counter in front of the girl, right between the energy drink shots and the lottery tickets. Her hands shook as she picked it up and put it back on.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Normally, this would be when he would walk away. (Normally, he probably would have walked away already.) But tonight he didn’t. Instead, he spoke for the first time since he’d left the kitchen two hours ago.

“Is someone coming to take you home?”

“My mom’s on her way,” the girl answered. “Boss wants me to stay for the rest of my shift, but... fuck that. It’s not worth my life.”

The door chimed again. It was two police officers. An older woman was with them.

“Mom,” called the clerk. Her voice was choked with tears, and she ran around the counter at once, seeming to forget about Batman entirely.

...which suited him just fine.

He couldn’t exactly fade into the shadows in this freakishly well-lit place, so instead he slipped out through the back while the police were distracted by the mother-daughter reunion. He grappled to the roof of the store, then up to a taller roof, and another, and another, following a familiar route until finally he was perched between two gargoyles on a high ledge atop Gotham Cathedral.

He’d been there a few minutes when his comm came to life. “Well, how about that, sir,” said Alfred, drier than the Sahara, “you *do* remember how to speak.”

And you remember how to eavesdrop, he could have replied, but he didn’t. He wasn’t ready for playful banter. He wasn’t ready for things to be okay again, to be normal again.

He hadn’t planned to do any patrols this week. Things had been quiet after Ivy’s latest fiasco at the Botanical Gardens, so he’d thought he could get away with staying in for Tim’s first week, just in case Tim needed him. Because that’s what good parents do: they drop prior commitments when their kids need them. And Bruce may not be a

great parent, but he thought he could at least try to be good. He thought he could pull it off for a week, if nothing else.

But no. He'd already fucked it up with Tim. On day 4. Fucked it up so badly that he gave the kid a fucking panic attack in the kitchen.

He shifted on the ledge. The restlessness was starting to eat away at him again. Without a word to Alfred, he fired his grappling hook and swung to the building across the street. He turned up the volume on his police scanner, listening for calls, hoping for a distraction.

It didn't take long. Gotham was still Gotham, after all.

Hostage situation, 56th and Riley Avenue.

He sent the coordinates to Alfred. He might not be speaking to the man at the moment, but it was good practice to tell *someone* where he was going. He would never let Dick get away with running off without back-up. And Jason—

No.

He needed to focus. He could already see the flashing lights of a dozen patrol cars stopped outside the warehouse. He perched on a nearby rooftop and peered down at the officer holding the scene. It both relieved him and concerned him to see a familiar face.

Batman leapt from the roof and glided down to land behind the crowd of cops that Jim was addressing. They parted before him, leaving a path straight to the Commissioner.

"Impeccable timing as ever," said Jim.

Batman just nodded. One thing he loved about communicating with Jim Gordon was how little he was usually expected to say.

"I hope you're well-rested," Jim added. "I have a feeling it's gonna be a long night."

Bring it on, thought Batman.

It was a little after 2 when Tim finally felt tired enough to try sleeping again. He'd brushed his teeth and put on his pyjamas hours ago, but after lying in the dark with his thoughts for a while, he'd gotten up again and gone back to his computer. After all, editing pictures of Batman was a lot better than thinking about how much he'd fucked up

with Bruce Wayne earlier tonight.

With a yawn, he saved his work and exited the photo editor. His computer had wanted a restart since this morning, but he just closed it and set it aside. He picked up his phone and went to the bed, which still seemed too huge, too soft, and too expensive for him. As he crawled under the duvet, his eyes were already closing. He fumbled for the lamp and turned it off, then settled on his side facing the nightstand and the door.

It felt like he'd just drifted off when his phone buzzed. He cracked open an eye, then decided that whatever it was could wait until morning.

But it buzzed again a bit later. And again a few seconds after that. And again. And again. And again, until finally Tim sighed and sat up, reaching for the lamp cord. He squinted in the light. His clock told him he'd slept for three-quarters of an hour, which was better than nothing, he supposed.

He picked up his phone. The screen was littered with notifications. It was one of his news and social media alerts, and it took him a moment to scroll through to find the earliest one. There it was—about forty minutes ago, someone had posted a video of Batman on a social media platform, and, despite the late hour, it was already gaining momentum.

No wonder, Tim thought. There was almost no video footage of Batman online. Most of the videos that claimed to be of Batman often showed nothing but a dark blur. Which was probably just as well. If anything of higher quality was shared, the major social media sites would immediately flag and delete it due to violent content and privacy concerns.

Tim had a feeling that Batman—and maybe the GCPD—also played a part in getting content removed, but he could never prove it, of course. Maybe he could if it happened to him, but, to his own surprise, he hadn't been on the receiving end of it himself. (Yet.)

He clicked the link to play the video. It was just a black screen at first, then a man's whispered voice. "Something's going on in the alley. I'm gonna go see what it is."

Tim raised his eyebrows. This guy must be new in town. Every homegrown Gothamite knew better. There was even a popular meme about it: *If you think you heard something in Gotham in the middle of the*

night, no you fucking didn't.

The video brightened as the man stepped through his balcony door. The lighting was terrible— it blew out the entire shot for a second or two. It didn't matter, though, since the phone was pointed at the concrete floor of the balcony.

"Oh *[bleep],* it's Batman," the man whispered.

Tim was impressed by the bleep, and more impressed by the way he kept the camera off Batman and the violence that he was unmistakably involved in. This guy might be new to the city, but he knew his way around the algorithm.

"Ouch," the man said under his breath. He spoke in a rush, keeping his voice low. "Batman just took a hit that looked like it hurt, but— oh, *man,* there we go. There we go! He's got him. He's got him, he's down."

The camera lurched up, past the railing of the balcony, and sure enough, there was Batman, standing in the alley just a few dozen feet away.

Tim's breath caught in his throat, and for a moment all he felt was jealousy. In almost three years of chasing, he'd *never* managed to get that close. (Dinnertime didn't count.)

He skipped back a few seconds, just to see it again. He wasn't the only one— the video's timeline showed a huge spike in traffic for that second-and-a-half when Batman was completely, perfectly in frame, well-lit by the street lights.

Tim paused it and stared. "Wow," he whispered. He couldn't help it. Even knowing who was under that mask, even living in the guy's house (temporarily), Batman was still an amazing sight to see.

After a moment, he resumed the video. Batman moved towards the criminal—his face was blurred, another point in the videographer's favour—and jostled him around a bit. The man shouted something, but it didn't stop Batman. Tim squinted at the screen, trying to see what he'd taken from the criminal's pocket, but it was too far away, and the light was too poor.

Then Batman walked away, which Tim thought was weird. He would have expected him to grapple up to the roof. Where was he going on street level? And why?

The criminal shouted after him, threatening him. And then, to Tim's surprise, the man filming shouted back, telling him to get over himself.

Tim skipped back and paused at that part, too, because the videographer didn't notice it, but he did— Batman's head turned slightly in his direction. It might have been Tim's imagination, but he thought he saw a sliver of Batman's white lenses, too, like he'd looked right at the camera.

Amateur, Tim thought with a smirk. *Never let him see you.*

Tim had a feeling the video would be gone by morning, so he downloaded it and saved it to his phone immediately, in the secure folder that didn't appear anywhere in his gallery or menu. Then he went to his laptop to save another copy there, so he could analyze it in more detail on the bigger screen.

Once he had it downloaded, he opened his photo blog, almost out of habit, and noticed a ton of notifications. People had been having a conversation about the video in the comments on Tim's most recent image— shared twenty-four days ago, his longest dry spell to date. Some asked simple questions, like if he'd seen it yet, or how he felt about it if he had. Others expressed concern, noting how long it had been since he'd updated. One idiot said it was probably Tim who took the video, and that he was changing media to try and get rich from the ad revenue on streaming platforms. (A bunch of other commenters said pretty much everything that Tim wanted to in response to that ridiculous theory.)

He got to the bottom of the thread and sighed, unsure of what to do. For obvious reasons, he wouldn't be able to get any new shots of Batman for a bit. At least not until he figured out how to avoid Batman's own systems, so he could sneak out of the manor unnoticed. Luckily, he was already secure online, with dummy IP addresses that made his blog updates almost impossible to track. So when he had the pictures, he was reasonably sure he could upload them without Bruce tracing him... but that didn't solve the problem of not being able to get any new pictures for the time being.

Should he tell his blog followers that he was on hiatus? Should he ghost them completely, then reappear in a few weeks or months with new images, like nothing had happened?

But both of those options presented a new problem: if Batman

suspected Tim already (and Tim was still pretty sure that he did, because why else would Tim be here), then disappearing from the internet during his stay at Wayne Manor would be a dead giveaway. Tim had to keep up appearances, so Bruce wouldn't get suspicious.

Then Tim got an idea.

He pulled tonight's video back up on his phone and scrolled through the comments there as well, looking for any hint as to the location. From the footage, it was almost impossible to tell—Gotham had hundreds of back alleys that looked identical—and the man who posted the video wouldn't say. Piecing together the comments, Tim was starting to narrow it down, but if this was going to work, there was no room for error.

He triple-checked that his security measures were in place then made his way into the GCPD servers, looking for incident reports. Given the time it would have taken to edit the video, Tim guessed that the actual crime took place sometime between 11 and midnight. GCPD shifts usually ran 12-12, and considering that most patrol officers did their paperwork at the end of the night to get a little overtime, Tim thought he had a good chance of finding it.

A moment later, he was proven right: a convenience store in the Cauldron was robbed at gunpoint a little after 11. The report (filed at 12:26) specifically said that the officer responded to a 383, which was the GCPD's code for vigilante activity. Given how quickly the cruiser had arrived in the video, Batman had likely called them himself.

In a new tab, Tim pulled up a map and typed in the address from the police report, just to be sure. Then he smiled. He was right again: the store was just two blocks from Gotham Cathedral.

Tim had been following Batman around long enough by now to know that he loved to hang out up there between jobs; Tim had dozens of photos of Batman blending in with the gargoyles. He opened his files and thanked his past self for tagging them so diligently. It was almost too easy to find an old picture that he hadn't shared yet, scrub the metadata so no one could identify the date or time that it was taken, and post it on his blog.

He hesitated, however. There was a chance that Batman *hadn't* been up there tonight. Though he doubted it, Tim could be wrong, and even if no one else had seen him on the roof of the cathedral, Batman would know the truth if he saw the photo. If Tim got it wrong,

Batman would know that his stalker hadn't actually been out in the city tonight.

Did that matter? Tim wasn't sure. There was still nothing to link the picture to him, in any case. Even if Batman discovered that the photo wasn't from tonight, Bruce (probably) wouldn't connect it with his newly acquired foster kid, who had been at his house all night.

The post might even clear his suspicions about Tim entirely. Once he no longer suspected Tim, Bruce would no doubt find some reason for CPS to find him a new home. It wouldn't be hard; all he'd have to do would be to echo what some of the other foster families had said. Tim could be out of Wayne Manor before the end of the summer. He'd be free to go back to his normal life until the emancipation paperwork was finalized and he was out of the foster system, which was what he really wanted most of all.

Tim would be taking a chance, but in the end, he liked his odds. He wrote a caption that acknowledged some of his commenters' questions and made a self-deprecating apology about not including a video. Then he posted the photo before he lost his nerve.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Tim and Bruce have a talk. Batman checks in with the ‘batarazzi’ (Dick chose the name).

Tim couldn’t get to the light switch before the footsteps were right outside his door. He held his breath. Maybe if he was quiet enough, Bruce would think he’d just fallen asleep with the light on and leave him be. Sometimes, when Tim was very lucky, that was what his father would think.

He had no luck tonight. There was a soft knock on the wood. “Tim?”

Tim grimaced. He didn’t have a choice. He opened the door, wondering how much trouble he was in and what Batman did when his kids stayed up past bedtime.

Chapter Notes

This might be my favourite chapter so far, so if you hate it, maybe don’t tell me, k?

Tim only had a few seconds’ warning— a step in the middle of the stairs creaked. He wondered if it was intentional, if Bruce (a man who was *very* capable of moving silently) was making noise on purpose again.

It didn’t matter. Tim had the warning, and he used it.

He closed every window on his laptop except for the basic web browser, which he only used for things that he was ‘supposed’ to do. The Metropolis Tourism Board page was still open, and he opened his three emergency tabs as well. One was a reading pane for a Japanese comic book, one was a forum about video games, and the last was a social media site that wasn’t technically supposed to allow people under 16 to join, but everyone lied about their age to get in, and, honestly, if the grown-ups in his life were worried about that, it was good because it meant they weren’t looking into what Tim was actually doing online.

But he couldn’t get to the light switch before the footsteps were right outside his door. They paused, and Tim froze. He held his breath.

Maybe, if he was quiet enough, Bruce would think he'd just fallen asleep with the light on and leave him be. Sometimes, when Tim was very lucky, that was what his father would think.

He had no luck tonight. There was a soft knock on the wood. "Tim?"

Tim grimaced. He didn't have a choice. He opened the door, wondering how much trouble he was in and what Batman did when his kids stayed up past bedtime.

But Bruce didn't look angry. He looked a little rough—there was a red mark low on his jaw that would probably turn into a bruise in a few hours, and his eyes were bloodshot—but not angry. His hair was damp like he'd just had a shower, and he was wearing red plaid pyjama pants paired with a black t-shirt.

"It's pretty late, bud," he said, which knocked Tim out of his staring.

"Yeah," Tim agreed guiltily. "I know. I— I was just, um."

He didn't have to go on because Bruce held his hands up like in surrender. The skin around his wrists was red as well, Tim noticed, but it looked more like a rash than an injury.

"It's okay," Bruce said. "Can I come in?"

Tim blinked. That wasn't what he was expecting. He figured Bruce would give him a curt *Go to bed, Tim.* Or maybe he'd barge in and close Tim's laptop for him and turn off the lights, like Mrs. Douglas had that one time when Tim stayed up past 1 to finish a history paper. (And he really was working on a paper that time.)

"Um, sure," Tim answered, stepping aside.

Bruce entered the room with a small smile. Tim followed, uncertain about what he was supposed to do next. But when Bruce glanced at his open laptop and took a seat at the desk, Tim just about had a heart attack and hurried across the room.

"I just wanted to finish reading that," he said quickly.

It was a lame excuse, but it didn't matter anyway, because it turned out Bruce wasn't interested in the computer at all. He was focused on Tim completely, and gestured for him to take a seat at the end of the bed. Tim did, feeling sort of in a daze.

“I wanted to apologize,” Bruce said. Still soft, still not angry. “For what happened in the kitchen earlier.”

“Oh. Uh, that’s okay,” Tim said automatically, because this was *weird*. He’d never heard of a parent apologizing to a kid before. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Wasn’t yours, either,” said Bruce, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. Then he let the silence hang, like he was waiting for Tim to explain, but Tim had no idea what to say. The whole thing was so embarrassing. It was bad enough that Bruce had had to see him like that. He *really* didn’t want to talk about it ever again.

“I’m fine now,” Tim told him after an uncomfortable minute, hoping that maybe they could leave it at that.

“I know you are, bud,” said Bruce, sitting back. “And we don’t have to get into it. Especially not at—” He glanced at the alarm clock behind Tim and sighed— “4:46 in the morning.”

“Sorry,” Tim heard himself say, but Bruce shook his head.

“You and me, Tim, we’re practically strangers,” he said, but his expression was kind. “We’re still getting to know each other, aren’t we?”

“Yeah,” Tim agreed, not sure where this was going.

“So I want you to know that you don’t have to tell me any details. Not ever, if you don’t want to,” Bruce emphasized. “But... if you can, I hope you can let me know what it was that upset you tonight. So I can try my best to make sure I never do that again.”

“You didn’t—” Tim started, but Bruce held up another hand.

His wrist looked really bad, actually, with red hives crawling halfway up his forearms, and a handful of tiny blisters. Tim recognized the pattern from the one and only time he went to summer camp. Tyler Porter had pushed him off the hiking trail into a patch of pointy-leafed plants, and he’d woken up the next morning itchy and miserable.

(Given what Poison Ivy got up to last week at the Botanical Gardens, it was probably safe to assume that Bruce didn’t get this rash from hiking.)

“Just think about it, okay?” Bruce said, pulling Tim out of his

thoughts. “Maybe tomorrow— later today,” he corrected himself, “maybe you can tell me?”

Tim swallowed hard. “Maybe,” he echoed in a small voice, though it didn’t seem likely, as he wasn’t sure he even knew how to explain it.

Still, that one-word answer seemed to satisfy Bruce, who smiled. “Okay,” he said. “Thank you.”

Tim didn’t know why Bruce was thanking him, but he nodded anyway. He got to his feet when Bruce did, and followed him to the door.

“Oh, and Tim?” he added, turning back when they got there. “Let’s maybe try and go to bed a little earlier tomorrow, yeah?”

His tone was mostly playful, and Tim breathed out a tiny laugh. “Yeah,” he agreed. “I will. Sorry, again.”

Bruce just nodded. “Goodnight, Tim.”

“Goodnight, Bruce.” He started to walk away, and Tim started to close the door, then a thought occurred to him, and he poked his head out into the hall. “Bruce?”

Bruce whirled back almost unnaturally fast. “Yeah?”

“Your arms,” said Tim. “That rash.”

It was *fascinating* to watch Batman freeze, even if it was only for a second before his posture relaxed again. If Tim wasn’t looking for a reaction, he doubted he would have noticed.

“Did you try baking soda?” Tim asked.

“Baking soda,” Bruce repeated, neutral.

“Yeah, you can make a paste with baking soda and water. At camp, a few years ago— well, it doesn’t matter,” Tim interrupted himself, his cheeks going hot. “Baking soda helps—” He hesitated, but it wasn’t his fault that the name was the same— “with poison ivy.”

Bruce blinked at this, then smiled. “I’ll give it a shot,” he said. “Goodnight.”

“’Night,” Tim echoed. He re-entered his room and shut the door. Then he leaned against it and let out the longest breath of his life.

If every conversation with Bruce Wayne was going to go like this, he'd almost rather be interrogated by Batman.

Bruce awoke to the welcome smell of blonde roast espresso and the unwelcome sound of Alfred opening his curtains.

"Good morning, Master Bruce," he said.

Bruce groaned and turned his face into his pillow, away from the painfully bright sunlight. "What time is it?" he rasped.

"A little after ten, sir," Alfred replied.

Bruce nodded, then his eyes shot open, light be damned. "Wait, ten? But I was supposed to—"

"Not to worry," Alfred cut him off. "I called Samantha and asked her how much of this 9AM board meeting you were really needed for. She assured me that you can arrive at 11, no harm done." Bruce's eyes had adjusted enough now that he could see Alfred's moustache twitch. "And she recommends the purple sports drink, sir. Apparently, it's much nicer to throw up than the orange."

Bruce huffed and wrangled himself into a sitting position, so he could take the cup Alfred was offering. At least it wouldn't be hard to play hungover this morning.

"Any sign of Tim?" he asked, after the first sip had made him feel a little more human.

"Not as of yet," Alfred answered, setting the coffee tray down on the nightstand. "But one expects late mornings from a teenaged boy on summer vacation."

Bruce hummed into his mug. "Also, he went to bed at the same time I did."

Alfred turned around at once. "He did *not.*"

"He did," Bruce confirmed. "His light was still on when I came upstairs."

Alfred tsked. "I saw him getting ready for bed at 10," he said. "The light was off when I checked at 12, and still off at 2. My apologies, sir, I assumed I didn't need to check anymore after that."

“No apology needed, Alfred,” said Bruce. “In your shoes, I would have done the same.”

“Do you think he knew I was checking?” Alfred asked. “That he turned off the light specifically because he knew I was there?”

“It’s possible,” said Bruce, because one glance at Tim’s laptop last night had told him that whatever he was doing up so late, it wasn’t reading. The manga he had open wasn’t even scrolled down past the second page. Bruce guessed that Tim had pulled up the tab quickly when he knocked, implying that he had something to hide and knew enough to hide it from Bruce.

“His previous carers did mention secretive behaviour,” said Alfred, echoing Bruce’s thoughts exactly. “Still, I suppose we shouldn’t be hasty. Perhaps he *had* been sleeping between 12 and 2, then woke up after.”

Bruce nodded. “Could be insomnia. Or anxiety,” he added, thinking of Tim’s panic attack in the kitchen. “Could be any number of things. We shouldn’t assume the worst.”

“Never thought I’d hear *you* say that,” Alfred remarked.

He took the now-empty cup from Bruce’s hands, so Bruce could get out of bed, stretch, and assess the damage. He’d had worse. He was sore, with a handful of bruises, most of which were thankfully in easy-to-hide places.

“Did you speak with Master Tim when you got home and discovered he was still awake?”

“I did,” said Bruce, but he paused his stretching routine to look at Alfred directly. “I’m sorry I went radio silent last night, Alfred. I just…”

He trailed off and shrugged, because there wasn’t really anything he could say to justify it, and he didn’t want to sound like he was making excuses.

“It’s all right, lad,” said Alfred gently, like he used to when Bruce was young. “Thank you for saying so.”

Bruce nodded and, after a moment, began his stretches again, telling Alfred about his conversation with Tim while he completed the routine.

“And are the two of you still going to Metropolis later today?”

“I was going to ask him if he still wants to,” said Bruce, rolling his now-much-looser shoulders. “Why? You that keen to get rid of me?” he joked.

“As a matter of fact, yes,” Alfred replied dryly. “I have a hot date lined up in Las Vegas.”

“Oh, good,” Bruce chuckled. “Take my black card, show her a good time.”

“You say that as if I wasn’t already planning to,” said Alfred.

His tone was still light, but his expression had sobered. Bruce followed his eyes down to the rash on his wrists. It didn’t look pretty in the full light of day.

He still didn’t know what exactly had caused the rash, because he hadn’t been able to pinpoint the chemical compound of Ivy’s latest creation. Until yesterday, it had been steadily getting better, but if it was anything like actual poison ivy, then the best treatment would be to leave it uncovered as much as possible. Or covered with something lighter than his armoured gauntlets, anyway.

“I think the suit just chafed it a bit,” he explained.

“Hm.” It was impressive, how much disapproval Alfred could inject into just one syllable. “I’ll fetch the antihistamines, shall I?”

“No,” Bruce sighed. “I probably shouldn’t sleep through the board— actually,” he interrupted himself. “Yes, do that.”

Alfred’s mouth quirked in amusement. “Very well, sir.”

Bruce stopped him before he turned away. “And— do we have any baking soda?”

After a very restful hour in the 67th floor executive boardroom—and a few less restful hours in his office—Bruce was finally back home. He’d had Alfred come and pick him up, not trusting himself to drive with the antihistamines still in his system, and he’d smiled to see Tim in the backseat when the car pulled up.

To his disappointment, however, Tim didn’t seem all that interested in conversation. They mostly just made small talk. Bruce thanked him for

the baking soda suggestion; after just one application of the paste this morning, his skin started feeling better, even before the antihistamines had kicked in.

Tim said, “You’re welcome,” but nothing more.

And when Bruce asked him if he still wanted to come with him to Metropolis tonight, he’d said, “If you want me to.”

They were stopped at a red light, so Bruce had looked to Alfred for clarification. But a minute shrug told him that Alfred didn’t have any more insight into that answer than Bruce did.

He’d let it lie, instead telling Tim that he had some more work to do at home, then they’d see how they were feeling at tea time. Worst case scenario, Bruce could go alone and catch an early train to make his meeting tomorrow morning, but he hoped he wouldn’t have to.

In the meantime, he really did have work to do. He went down to the Cave at his first opportunity and pulled up the links that Alfred had flagged for him while he was tied up at the office. They summed up some of the social media firestorm caused by the video footage that had gone viral in the middle of the night. Bruce wished he’d been able to deal with it sooner, and, for one moment, he allowed himself to miss having a partner. Alfred could only do so much, after all, and Barbara still wasn’t sure if she wanted to re-join the team full-time. She did Bruce a few favours now and then when he needed help, but it wasn’t the same. If he still had Robin, they might have been able to rescue the hostages quicker last night. Or Robin might have been able to come back to the Cave and deal with the online video while Batman handled the hostage situation alone.

Bruce sighed and let the thought go. It was pointless to dwell on what could have been, especially when there was more than enough to deal with in the moment.

It was too late to try and scrub the video. Even if he could, enough people had seen it by now that it would make no difference. Mainstream news channels were even running segments on it, tacking it onto the ends of their broadcasts like Batman was some quirky human interest story. He was, Bruce supposed. Even years into his mission, there were some who still didn’t believe he existed, and that was fine by him.

But this was the first time that clear video footage had ever been captured and shared, and some of the links that Alfred had collated

for him were also articles that posited the video was fake. Bruce let loose a few bots that would give these sites more traffic, and used carefully-disguised dummy accounts to leave skeptical comments on the video itself as well as several social media posts about it. He got immediate replies and engaged with almost every one, obstinately expressing his belief that the Batman didn't exist and presenting theories about how videos like this could be faked.

He knew it was a gambit. The algorithm didn't care if he was debunking something—engagement was engagement—and more comments would mean that the posts would have a wider reach, but if he could sew a few more seeds of doubt, he would.

When he'd done all he could on that front, he left the video aside and checked in with the most popular Batman photo blog currently online. It was the only one that had ever gotten good pictures of him and Robin, and the photographer seemed to have an annoying uncanny ability to find him wherever he went on patrol.

The blog been dormant for almost a month, but an email notification told Bruce that it had updated last night, just a couple of hours after the viral video hit the internet.

Its latest photo showed Batman perched atop Gotham Cathedral. The caption was about as glib as Bruce had come to expect after following the blog for nearly two years:

lot of you asking if the video tonight was me. hate to disapoint but i was high af as usual

Bruce sighed. If he hadn't been so distracted by his worry about Tim last night, maybe he could have finally gotten a glimpse of— *wait.*

This photo was of the west side of the building. Bruce could tell because of the gargoyles. They looked no different from the ground, but he'd seen them up close enough times by now to know that their poses varied, and the ones on the west side were more playful than those on the east. And, while he may have been distracted, he was positive that he'd been on the *east* side of the cathedral last night.

He closed his eyes, putting himself back there. He used the communication from Alfred as an emotional touchstone to ground him and ensure that he was remembering yesterday in particular and not one of the countless other times he'd sat amongst the gargoyles at the top of the cathedral.

After a moment of deep breathing and focus, he could see it. The city was laid out below him in intersecting lines of light, until it was abruptly cut off by the black water of the bay. He tilted his head left, and there was Mercy Bridge, lit up like an airport runway. To the right was a low stretch of homes and apartments dwarfed by the skyscrapers of the Financial District.

Bruce re-opened his eyes, doubly certain now. He looked closer at the photo, at the bits of sky that he could see around the cathedral. It was too bright; if he had to guess, this photo was taken on a night with a moon. There had been no moon last night.

That confirmed it. The 'batarazzi' (Dick chose the name) hadn't actually been in the Cauldron last night at all. This post was a fake-out, intended to fool the blog's followers.

Had the blog ever done something like this before? Bruce couldn't be certain, but he trusted his past self to have noticed if so, just like he did tonight. But *why* would the blogger do this? What purpose could be gained from pretending to be in Gotham City when they weren't?

Maybe the photographer was just taking advantage of the opportunity presented by the viral video to get more traffic. That would be unusual, since they'd never seemed to be motivated by popularity before, but not impossible, he mused.

As always, Bruce downloaded the photo and attempted to trace the IP address. But there was no metadata, and, unless his mystery photographer was in Istanbul, the address had been spoofed or rerouted, maybe even more than once.

Or maybe they really were in Istanbul. Gordon hadn't received any mysterious intel packets lately. Unlike Jim, Bruce wasn't convinced that the blogger and the snitch were one and the same; he thought it was more likely that one was selling photos to the other, though he had no evidence either way. Still, he couldn't deny that it was a bizarre coincidence that they had both seemed to go dark at the same time. Until last night, of course.

Bruce's phone buzzed suddenly, shaking him out of his thoughts. He picked it up to find a text from Alfred, which meant that he was too preoccupied to come down himself to tell him it was tea time.

Laying aside the mystery for the time being, Bruce replied that he was on his way, then headed for the stairs.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

> Bruce and Tim finally board a train to Metropolis... but maybe the real trip is the cold case they discuss along the way.
>
> *“So,” Bruce began, “this exhibit you mentioned last night. It’s about a French inventor?”*
>
> *“Louis Le Prince,” Tim supplied immediately.*
>
> *“Right,” said Bruce. “And you said he disappeared?”*
>
> *They didn’t need to find another topic of conversation for three hours.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce had been on the terrace just a few seconds when he noticed the signs that Tim had something to say. So, once Alfred had poured the tea, Bruce picked up his cup and waited. It didn’t take Tim long.

He sent a look at Alfred, who nodded, then asked, “Are we going to Metropolis tonight?”

We. Bruce had to suppress just how much it meant to hear that single syllable. “I would like to,” he answered. “How do you feel about it?”

“I—” Another look at Alfred. “I’d like to go, too,” said Tim, then his confidence seemed to waver. “If it’s okay with you.”

“Of course it’s okay with me,” Bruce told him. “I’m happy to spend time with you, Tim. And whatever you want to do in the city,” he added a little more gently, mindful of how this conversation went last night, “I’m more than happy to do with you.”

Tim nodded, though he still seemed a little doubtful. A moment of awkward silence followed, as Bruce thought about—and then decided against—asking Tim about the things he wanted to see in Metropolis. He still didn’t know exactly what had set him off last night, so it was probably safer to avoid it.

Alfred came to his rescue. “I’ve taken the liberty of reserving two

tickets aboard the evening train," he said. "And I called Liana. Her team did a sweep this afternoon and brought in some groceries, so the penthouse is ready for your arrival."

"Thank you, Alfred," said Bruce sincerely.

"Penthouse?" Tim repeated.

"Master Bruce owns property in several major cities," Alfred explained.

Bruce found himself bracing for Tim's reaction. He could still remember how Dick was floored when he found out. (But a house that stayed in one place was kind of mind-blowing in and of itself in those early days.) A few years later, Jason went off at Bruce about 'hoarding,' and only really forgave him when he learned that the apartments and condos were also safe houses full of Batman's supplies. (Selina, however, still gave him shit every chance she got.)

But obviously, owning multiple properties was expected, and maybe even normal, for Tim because Tim just nodded.

"Cool," he said. "Guess it's better than a hotel."

"It certainly comes in handy for business trips," Bruce agreed.

Tim twitched slightly, then recovered with a smile that was a bit too wide to be genuine. A smile that Bruce recognized from his first day at the manor, as well as society events with his parents before that. It was as clear as if he'd pulled a mask out of his pocket and put it on.

How has no one noticed, Bruce wondered. *How long has it been since someone looked closely enough at this kid to see it?*

Maybe no one ever had. His parents certainly didn't. Based on Tim's file and what Bruce could glean from his own investigation, Janet and Jack Drake had had no contact with their son since they lost custody. They'd declined every single opportunity for a supervised visit. But even before the State intervened, the level of their neglect was enough to turn Bruce's stomach; at least when *his* parents left him, it hadn't been by choice.

He kept the conversation light while he and Alfred finished their tea. (Again, Tim's mug went untouched.) Tim went to his bedroom afterwards to pack, and Bruce went into his study to read the materials that WE's PR Department wanted him to review before his

meeting with Lex Luthor. They had been quite put out when Bruce insisted that he was going alone, but there wasn't anything they could say to change his mind. It was Bruce's company, after all.

A few hours and a light supper later, Alfred drove them to the station. Tim didn't really say much during the car ride, but Bruce tried not to worry. On a scale of Dick to Jason, Tim set new a standard in terms in quietness. Except, Bruce thought, recalling how he talked about LexCorp's medical research, when he got onto a subject that he was really interested in. That gave Bruce an idea.

Alfred bid them farewell (muttering a hushed *Good luck* into Bruce's ear when they embraced), and they headed to the counter to collect their tickets. In almost no time at all, they were on the train, seated opposite one another in a compartment with two other seats that stayed empty.

As the train pulled out of the station, Bruce had his phone in front of him, but he was surreptitiously watching Tim watch the city move outside their window. Bruce understood the impulse; Gotham was endlessly fascinating. But its darkness was so dark that sometimes he forgot to enjoy the bright parts.

When Tim finally pulled his eyes away, Bruce set his phone down as well. "So," he began, "this exhibit you mentioned last night, at the Museum of Technology. You said it was about a French inventor?"

"Louis Le Prince," Tim supplied immediately.

"Right, that was the name," said Bruce, like he'd only just remembered. "I'm not familiar with him. You said he disappeared?"

"Yes," said Tim, and they didn't need to find another topic of conversation for the entire three-hour trip.

"No, but, see—" said Tim, leaning forward into Bruce's space— "they would have known that the camera itself was worthless. What mattered was the paperwork, and that disappeared along with Le Prince."

"But why not take or destroy the camera just in case?" Bruce asked. "Especially if Edison knew he was behind in the technology. Wouldn't it make sense for him or his men to have Le Prince's invention on hand, so he could reverse-engineer it?"

“Not if they knew how patents worked,” Tim countered. Part of him couldn’t believe that Bruce was actually letting him ramble on about something so nerdy. His parents would have told him to let it go more than an hour ago. “And we’re talking about Thomas Frickin’ Edison here. The guy was almost as famous for his lawyers as he was for his genius.”

“Yes and no,” said Bruce, but he had that thoughtful look about him again. “Do you really think Edison was so power-hungry that he was snapping up patents *three years* before he even had a working prototype?”

“Yes,” Tim exclaimed, probably too loud. “Don’t you?”

“Maybe,” Bruce said, then he shook his head. “But it’s not a compelling motive to me. Not for the level of conspiracy that you’re talking about. It would have taken a lot of manpower for Edison to coordinate the kidnapping and murder of a man overseas, and a lot of manpower means a lot of potential leaks. Somebody would have let something slip in the years since.”

“I don’t know,” said Tim. He hesitated, then threw caution to the winds and said, “But think about organized crime. The mob’s pretty big, but nobody snitches because they know better.”

He didn’t know how he expected Bruce to reply—part of him wanted a veiled remark about how much or how little mobsters talk in certain circumstances—but he wasn’t anticipating Bruce to throw his head back and let out a full-throated laugh.

“Are you saying Thomas Edison was a mob boss?”

“Maybe,” said Tim, laughing as well. “He was a weird guy.”

“Weird people aren’t always criminals,” Bruce pointed out, still grinning. Tim snorted.

“Dude, we live in Gotham,” he said, and Bruce chuckled.

“All right, fair point,” he admitted. “But I’m still not convinced. To me, Le Prince’s brother killing him for their mother’s inheritance feels a lot more realistic.”

“You mean boring,” said Tim.

“I do mean boring,” Bruce agreed, leaning back in his seat and

crossing one leg over the other. “But think about it. We have no eyewitnesses that can verify Albert’s claim that Louis boarded the train.”

“Eyewitnesses are notoriously unreliable,” Tim countered, then winced internally at how rude he’d just sounded.

But Bruce didn’t call him out for it. “You’re right,” he said to Tim’s surprise. “Just because he wasn’t seen doesn’t mean he wasn’t there.”

“But you’re still not convinced he got on the train at all.”

“No, I’m not,” Bruce said. “Louis’ train ticket gave Albert a ready-made out, and claiming that Louis boarded would buy him some time. Not to mention possible police jurisdictional issues between the *Sûreté nationale* and the Paris peacekeepers.”

Tim wasn’t going to ask how Bruce knew so much about policing in late nineteenth century France. “Albert didn’t use that time to run, though,” he said instead. “If he lied to the police about Louis getting on the train, wouldn’t he use that opportunity to get the hell out of dodge?”

Bruce raised one eyebrow, and Tim sighed. He reached into his pocket for a dollar bill.

“Thank you,” said Bruce, uncrossing his legs and leaning forward to take it. “But you’re right, Albert didn’t act like a guilty man. Still, I think he’s the better suspect. Things aren’t always a big conspiracy, you know. Usually, the truth is a lot more banal than you think. A man kills his brother over money every day.”

“Money that he didn’t seem to need?” Tim pressed, but when Bruce just shrugged, he added, “The family always thought Edison was involved. They never believed Albert was capable of something like that.”

“Family never wants to believe the worst,” said Bruce, his tone shifting into something more sombre. “And as for their suspicions about Edison, well, I think they believed it for the same reason you do. It’s a variation on the thought that everything happens for a reason. That a loved one’s death couldn’t possibly be due to something so simple as greed or so random as a momentary lapse in control.”

Tim stared, struck by a thought that hadn’t really occurred to him until now: Bruce Wayne was Batman, yes, but he was also *Bruce*

Wayne, a man who'd watched his parents die a senseless death at the hands of a mugger who was about to get exactly what he wanted—money and valuables from one of Gotham's richest men. *Of course* Bruce believed that Albert killed Louis. Tim wondered if Bruce was, in a sense, talking to himself when he said that not everything was a conspiracy. He'd probably spent ages trying to figure out the larger reasons for his parents' death, and what did he have to show for it? As far as Tim knew, their killer had never been brought to trial.

"What?" asked Bruce after a moment. "Do I have something on my face?"

He did, in fact. The makeup he'd used to cover the bruise on his chin had rubbed off slightly, showing a dark shadow where there shouldn't have been one. But Tim wasn't going to point it out; Bruce would no doubt catch sight of it in his reflection soon enough, and excuse himself to go fix it.

"Just thinking," Tim said. "What do you make of Louis' son dying in a mysterious hunting accident right after he testified against Edison?"

He was half-expecting Bruce to finally tell him he'd had enough and ask to change the subject, but Bruce didn't. Instead, he took a breath, like Tim's question required careful consideration.

"Well, it wasn't *right* after," he pointed out. "It was three years after the trial. A lot can happen in three years."

"I suppose," Tim conceded reluctantly.

"And as for the death itself..." Bruce looked like he was weighing his words. "I don't know. I think we need more physical evidence before we can guess whether or not it was accidental."

Tim huffed a laugh. "Good luck with that. It happened in 1901, so unless you're secretly a time traveller..."

The second the words left his mouth, Tim remembered that Batman probably knew someone who *could* time travel. But Bruce, of course, laughed it off.

"Right," he said. "Since we can't go back and look at the scene where he died, we have to look at what we do know: Aldolphe was a young man who'd lost his father a decade ago. In that time, he tried to protect his father's legacy against a much more powerful man, but he failed, so—"

“So you think it was self-inflicted? He killed himself out of guilt?”

“Hard to say,” said Bruce, again not seeming to mind that Tim had interrupted him. “I doubt that contemporary ballistics analysis would have been able to uncover the angle of entry, but there’s nothing as far as what you’ve told me that would point to it being a close-range shot.”

If Tim didn’t know the truth, it would be so weird to hear Bruce Wayne, prominent socialite, talking like this. Most of Gotham thought he was a privileged idiot barely able to string a sentence together when it wasn’t written by his publicist. Tim interjected again before Bruce could realize how out-of-character he was acting.

“So maybe it wasn’t,” he said. “Maybe it was premeditated.”

“Or it was a stray bullet,” said Bruce. “Hunting accidents are surprisingly common, even now, so in those days, I imagine they happened all the time.”

“Maybe he did shoot himself, and the family covered it up,” Tim mused.

“Could very well be,” Bruce said, and he smiled. “Any other theories?”

Seriously? thought Tim. He was sure he’d have bored Bruce to tears by now. But then again, maybe he shouldn’t have been surprised that Batman loved a cold case.

“Just one,” said Tim, “but it’s flimsy.”

“Louis Le Prince was abducted by aliens?” Bruce guessed with a completely straight face.

Tim couldn’t help it. He burst out laughing. “That’s way better than what I was gonna say, so sure. Let’s go with that.”

“All right,” said Bruce, grinning. “Better call the museum and let them know they have to change the exhibit.”

Tim shook his head and looked out the window, still smiling. He noticed the skyscrapers of Metropolis were a lot closer than they were the last time he’d checked. So close, in fact, that he had to crane his neck to see the tops of some of them. Sure enough, an announcement came over the train’s PA a moment later, saying that they were only ten minutes from the downtown station.

Bruce got to his feet. “I’m going to hit the restroom before we get off,” he said. “Will you be all right on your own for a minute?”

What a weird question, Tim thought. “Yeah, I’ll be fine,” he said, hoping that he managed to keep his expression blank enough that Bruce wasn’t offended. He must have succeeded, because Bruce just nodded and left the compartment.

Tim turned back to the window. He’d never seen Metropolis before. Even at night, it was bright, all glass and smooth surfaces. It couldn’t have been more different than Gotham’s long shadows and rugged brick, where even the modern buildings had a gargoyle or two. Tim often wondered if there was a stipulation about that buried somewhere in the City’s building code. (But he also didn’t care enough to seriously look into it.)

When Bruce returned, the bruise on his chin had disappeared again under a layer of nearly invisible foundation. Tim suppressed a smile as he collected his duffle bag and backpack from the overhead rack. Bruce only had a briefcase— another advantage to having an apartment already set up here, Tim supposed.

Getting off the train and through the station was a rather slow process, but finally Tim and Bruce were outside, standing in line for a taxi. The sky was clear, a few stars visible through the light pollution. The air was warm and fresh-scented. People around them were smiling, helping each other with their luggage, making small talk. There was no sound of sirens, no shouting in the distance. There weren’t even any trash bags on the corners, and Tim didn’t see a single rat.

“What’s wrong?” Bruce asked, obviously noticing Tim’s expression.

“I didn’t think it’d be so different,” Tim answered. Bruce still looked puzzled, so he explained. “From Gotham, I mean.”

“Oh. Yeah,” said Bruce, looking around them in turn. “It kinda creeps me out, if I’m being honest.”

Tim thanked every deity in existence that their cab arrived right then, because he had *no idea* what he was supposed to say to that.

Chapter End Notes

Is Bruce right about policing in nineteenth century France? Who knows? (Seriously, who knows, because I sure don’t. I devoted a

whole five minutes to research for this chapter.)

ETA: I guess I did a bit more than five minutes of research, as I watched this video some time ago, which is where I got most of the information for the Louis Le Prince case. In case you are interested in learning more, check it out: Buzzfeed Unsolved: The Historic Disappearance of Louis Le Prince.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

> Bruce and Tim's pretty great weekend in Metropolis takes a downward turn early on Sunday morning when Bruce overhears something he wasn't supposed to.
>
> *Bruce exited the safe room, shutting and locking it behind him. He went to the bedroom door and cracked it open, expecting to hear Tim heading to the bathroom or the kitchen for a glass of water. But that wasn't what he heard at all.*

Chapter Notes

> Please note the new tags above and take care. Things are gonna get be a little rough for the next few chapters, but, well, *points at title of fic*.

It was late enough on Saturday night that it was actually Sunday morning. Tim had gone to bed hours ago, seemingly worn out from another full day, but Bruce was still working.

Yesterday, they'd spent the majority of the day at the aquarium after Bruce was finished up at LexCorp. Then they went out for a nice dinner before coming back to the penthouse to watch an action movie that Bruce thought Tim was a little young for, but Tim assured him he'd first seen it when he was eight. (Bruce did not find this comforting.)

Today, they had gone to the Le Prince exhibit, which was mostly about his impressive inventions, including the sixteen-lens camera that recorded moving pictures, something completely unheard of in 1888. The man's mysterious disappearance was only one small part of the exhibit, but given the crowd, it garnered the most interest. Tim certainly spent a long time there, reading every tidbit of information the museum had to offer. Bruce understood the appeal; it was a tantalizing cold case, but he remained convinced that it probably wasn't as fantastical as history had made it seem.

After they'd checked out a few other parts of the museum, Bruce surprised Tim by suggesting another outing. The previous night, while Tim was watching that incredibly violent and gun-filled movie, Bruce had done a little research and learned that a local true crime author

was visiting the downtown branch of the Metropolis Public Library for a reading and book signing. Tim had readily agreed to go, and he really seemed to enjoy the event. But when Bruce offered to buy him a signed copy of the book, Tim declined. Bruce suspected—or maybe just hoped—that that was more out of politeness than a lack of interest. (Especially because he'd waited until Tim went to the restroom, then doubled back and bought one anyway. Tim's birthday *was* next month, after all.)

Tim's pleased surprise at Bruce suggesting an event that they could attend together and his refusal to accept the book were two new pieces of evidence that Bruce added to the mental case file he'd opened on Tim. Together with other factors, like his reluctance to have Alfred prepare his meals or do his laundry, these led Bruce to conclude that Tim was so used to being left alone that any attention at all was disarming, and even frightening in certain circumstances. Like in the kitchen, which, despite their conversation in the middle of the night afterwards, Tim hadn't brought up since.

Which was fine, Bruce thought. And understandable. It was a hard thing to talk about. Bruce just hoped that he wouldn't screw up and trigger Tim again before they got the chance to talk it out.

This was, in part, why Bruce was up so late tonight. He'd been reading articles about victims of child neglect and best practices for parenting kids in Tim's position. Because, for all that Dick and Jason—and Bruce himself—had been abandoned by their parents, wilful neglect left its own complicated scars that were largely unfamiliar to Bruce.

After Tim had gone to bed, Bruce switched gears, moving from the living room sofa to the penthouse's safe room—the walk-in closet in the master bedroom—to dive into one of his other open cases.

Unfortunately, it wasn't going well. Lex Luthor had revealed next to nothing during their meetings, other than the fact that he really wanted a stake in WE's Applied Science division. In fact, three minutes into their meeting on Friday morning, he'd offered to buy it outright.

"You don't strike me as a man who needs an Applied Science division," he'd said.

"Oh?" Bruce replied. He raised one eyebrow, aiming for something between flirty and intrigued. "Then what *do* I strike you as?"

Luthor's smile was equally charming, though his eyes stayed cold. "You strike me as a man who needs a million-dollar yacht."

Bruce had laughed, light and musical, but he listened to Luthor's pitch. He even managed to record parts of it and grab a few snapshots of his slideshow by pretending to get notifications— from his girlfriend, his *other* girlfriend (don't tell anyone), and Kitty Café, his favourite mobile game that was just, like, *so cute.*

Reading between the lines of Luthor's blatant attempts to butter him up, Bruce had concluded that, on the whole, it was looking more and more like Tim was onto something with the medical devices angle. Luthor himself admitted that LexCorp was falling behind its competition. When he cited Drake Industries' advancements in surgical mesh, Bruce felt an odd rush of pride. (He then immediately reminded himself that it was *way* too early to feel anything of the sort.)

After the presentation, Luthor had given Bruce a tour of his labs— or some of them, at least. Bruce knew from what Clark had told him that there was a lot more beneath the surface, and none of it was as bright or cheery as the parts he saw. Still, he acted impressed the way he knew Luthor wanted him to, and he shook hands with a few department heads, including Dr. Sebastian Cronin, the man who'd stepped in to lead the biotech division after his boss died back in May. Dr. Michaela Rota had been a titan in her field, and as a result, her death was the only one to go public, attributed to a bizarre but not impossible car crash on the outskirts of Gotham City.

Luthor—who had always been notoriously hard to read—gave no reaction when Bruce expressed his condolences for Dr. Rota, but Dr. Cronin seemed visibly shaken.

"She left big shoes to fill," he said, his voice flat like it was a mantra. His palm was clammy with sweat when he shook Bruce's hand again a few minutes later.

Last night, Bruce had reviewed Cronin's employment records, financial records, and social media presence, but the man was so clean he practically squeaked. Tonight, after turning down Luthor's second offer to buy the Applied Science division (but promising to consider negotiations for some of WE's other areas), Bruce had expanded his search, reviewing the information he had on all of the scientists who'd turned up dead, including Dr. Rota, to see if there was anything he might have missed. He noticed this time that, prior to their—first figurative, then literal—termination, all of them had indeed worked in med tech, though some only peripherally.

It wasn't much to go on, but, thanks to Tim, it was a bit more than Bruce would have had otherwise, and that was something.

When the clock display turned from 3:49 to 3:50, Bruce leaned back from the computer and stretched. The silent alert he'd set up remained dormant. Out of respect for Tim's privacy, the cameras in the penthouse were off, but the alert would flash if the sensors detected noise or movement in the hall. Bruce had rigged it up only so Tim wouldn't catch him unawares; the high-tech equipment all around him would be hard to explain, even though Bruce was pretty sure that Tim already thought he was paranoid.

That had started Friday morning, when Bruce was about to leave for his first meeting at LexCorp. He'd been listing off things Tim could do while he was gone, telling him about the various streaming services available on the television and an old video game system that Dick had left here ages ago. But Tim—who was proving to be good at surprising him—answered that he was planning to go for a long walk and take photos.

"All by yourself?" Bruce had asked.

"...yes?" said Tim, puzzled. "You've got your meeting. I mean, I guess we could go together after, but it'd be pretty boring for you, I think."

Boredom was *not at all* Bruce's concern. Metropolis might be safer than Gotham on paper, but it was still a big city that Tim had never visited before, and Tim was still a 14-year-old boy. Anything could happen.

"Don't worry, I'll be careful," Tim said, while Bruce was wondering if there was any way he could casually give Tim a Bat communicator with a built-in SOS function. (There wasn't.)

He ended up reminding Tim to make sure his phone was fully charged before he left the penthouse and telling him—more than once—that he could call at any time if he needed anything, no matter what.

"There's nothing so important about this meeting that I can't be interrupted," he said, and he watched Tim make a conscious choice to hide his doubtful expression.

At least he'd accepted the paper map that Bruce gave him, and he promised to stay within ten blocks of the penthouse. Bruce got the distinct impression that Tim was indulging him on both requests, but there was nothing to be done about that, and at least he would be

safer. (Bruce also, very heroically, did *not* call Clark and ask him to keep his eyes and ears open for a child in distress within a ten-block radius of the penthouse.)

Tim seemed reluctant to show Bruce the photos when he asked him about them later. Rather than letting Bruce take the camera to scroll through them himself, Tim kept a firm grasp on it, sitting beside him on the couch to look through them together. They were beautiful, but when Bruce said so, Tim seemed even more uncomfortable. Bruce made a mental note not to gush in the future, but instead stick to simple declarative sentences about the objective quality of Tim's work. He had a feeling that would go over better for someone unsure of his own value, even though it hurt to think about what had happened to make Tim think himself so unworthy of attention or regard.

But these were challenges best left for the light of day. Bruce yawned and rolled his neck, then prepared to power down the computer. Before he could, however, the alert flashed in the corner of the screen. The sensors had detected sound in the hallway.

Quickly, Bruce exited the safe room, shutting and locking the door behind him. He went to the bedroom door and cracked it open, expecting to hear Tim heading to the bathroom or the kitchen for a glass of water.

But that wasn't what he heard at all. He heard *voices.*

He pushed out into the hall at once, turning towards the living room and kitchen. But he stopped dead in front of Tim's bedroom door, because whoever was talking was in there.

He listened, and, after a second, he relaxed. There was only one voice after all, and it was Tim's. Bruce could hear shuffling now, too, fabric rustling and the slight shift of the mattress on the box spring. Tim was just talking in his sleep. But when Bruce began to turn away, his instincts told him to linger here a little longer. It only took a few seconds to find out why.

Tim's breathing changed abruptly, becoming ragged, before turning into short, uneven gasps. And then the crying started.

No— not crying. *Weeping.*

Huge, wracking sobs, hoarse and terrible, unlike anything Bruce had heard from Tim before, full of raw, unfiltered grief. The sound threw Bruce back in time.

An enormous empty house, its portraits not enough to replace the image of blood and pearls that played behind his eyes. Alfred's arms around him.

Twin headstones, slick and shiny in the rain, and a boy who used to shine in the spotlight now mud-flecked and dull. Reaching for him.

A fatal overdose, accidentally discovered, and a boy in a red tunic rushing forward, refusing to believe that she was dead. Pushing him away.

Bruce shook off the memories and put his hand on the doorknob. The past didn't matter. Tim needed him *now*.

But before he could turn the handle, the crying stopped, replaced by Tim's voice again. It was interspersed with sniffs, and almost drowned out by the steady creaking of the mattress. Bruce could make out the words this time.

"...not real... just a dream... all right. It's not real. It was just a dream. You're all right..."

On and on it went. Bruce could see the scene as clearly as if the door was made of glass: Tim was rocking himself back and forth on the bed, saying everything a parent was supposed to say when their child had had a nightmare. The things that *Bruce* was supposed to say now.

His hand dropped from the doorknob. His head spun. How long had this been going on? How many times had Tim done this, because no one else could— or would? And how had his previous carers never noticed?

After a moment, Tim's words and sniffs petered out on the other side of the door. The silence which followed answered Bruce's questions. None of Tim's previous carers had noticed his nightmares because Tim didn't let anyone see.

They'd called him *independent.* They'd noted that he was *helpful* and *good at taking care of himself.* One had even used the word *self-sufficient.* But he also had bad habits, like staying up past bedtime and sneaking out of the house after dark, which didn't make sense to them, because they'd never seen this side of it. They'd had no idea that the kid was suffering in silence. They'd had no way of knowing that he was probably afraid to go to sleep.

His still being awake at almost 5 in the morning the other day made perfect sense to Bruce now. Maybe he had even been asleep when Alfred checked on him, and then a nightmare had woken him up later.

Maybe he'd been on his computer because he was trying to find a way to get his mind off whatever he'd seen in his dreams.

None of these revelations told Bruce how he ought to handle the situation right now, however. He stood in the hall, paralyzed, until he heard the bed creak once more, and quiet footsteps started heading towards the door. Bruce silently retreated to the master bedroom and listened as Tim made his way to the bathroom, then the kitchen, then back. He didn't take one step towards Bruce's room, let alone knock or ask for help.

He's never had anybody in his corner, Bruce heard Lillian say again. Did she even know how right she was?

(Probably. She'd always been right about Jason, too.)

Bruce ran a hand over his face and closed his eyes. He exhaled a long breath, then went back to the computer in the safe room. It only took a few seconds to tweak the penthouse sensors to ping his watch and phone. He wasn't going to miss it if Tim needed him again. He wasn't going to fail to intervene like every other parent in this kid's life.

Bruce went to bed. He didn't sleep.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

> Tim's having a terrible morning. Maybe that's why he decides to do something very, very dumb.
>
> *"Tim?" said Bruce.*
>
> *Tim gasped, jolted out of his thoughts. His body jerked, and he hissed when something hot splashed across his hand. The side of the mug hit the table with a thump, and Tim realized what had just happened.*
>
> *"Sorry! I'm so sorry," he blurted out, as his coffee ran onto the pristine white floor in a steady, staining stream.*

Chapter Notes

> Warning for references to a nightmare that features a child being injured/killed in a tragic accident. There are no graphic details given, but it is still upsetting. Please take care.

The smell of fresh coffee woke Tim up, though he hadn't been sleeping deeply to begin with. He never did, after a nightmare.

He checked the time on his phone. A little after 7. He'd only gotten back to sleep around 5.

Good enough, he decided, and got out of bed.

After a quick trip to the bathroom, Tim followed his nose to the kitchen, his mouth practically watering. Through the brain fog of early morning, he found himself wondering why Bruce had changed his routine today. After a week of nothing but tea, Tim had assumed that Bruce didn't drink coffee at all, and he'd resigned himself to a future filled with Starbucks runs.

He paused when he realized Bruce was seated at the table with a mug of his own. His back was to him, and he seemed to be scrolling on his phone, but Tim would be a fool if he thought Batman didn't have enough situational awareness to know he was there.

Sure enough, a moment later he said, "Good morning, Tim," without turning around.

“Hi,” said Tim.

Cautiously, he opened the cupboard and pulled out a mug. It was easier to beg forgiveness than ask permission, after all— or so they always said. Personally, Tim had never been very good at either.

“Are you hungry?” Bruce asked. “There’s cereal, and yogourt in the fridge. Or we could go out to eat.”

“I’m okay for now,” said Tim.

He bit his tongue and looked longingly at the mostly-full carafe, steaming on the warmer in front of him. After going so far as grabbing the handle, he decided that begging forgiveness probably wasn’t a situation he wanted to find himself in with Batman. So instead, he took a breath and let the question out in a rush.

“Bruce, can I have some coffee?”

Bruce raised his head, then turned his entire body, swinging his legs to the side of the chair. Tim blinked in surprise when he got a glimpse of his face. Bruce looked about as tired as Tim felt, with shadows under his eyes and stubble covering his chin and jaw. (The upside was that his bruise was practically invisible now.) His blue eyes, when they landed on Tim, were puzzled but also kind.

“Yeah, okay,” he said. “But only one cup.”

“Okay,” Tim agreed, too grateful to point out that he’d been drinking 2 or 3 a day for more than a year at this point. He poured the coffee into his mug, then raised it to his nose and breathed in deep. It was like being reunited with a long-lost friend.

“Cream’s in the fridge door,” said Bruce. Tim glanced up to see that he’d turned around again and thankfully (probably) hadn’t seen Tim’s somewhat embarrassing ritual. “I think there’s sugar in the pantry, too, beside the tea.”

“That’s okay,” said Tim, walking to the table and taking a seat to Bruce’s left. “I don’t put anything in it.”

Bruce pursed his lips. “That’s not good for your stomach.”

Tim glanced at Bruce’s coffee—also black—and shrugged. It seemed for a second like Bruce was going to argue, then he let it go and went back to his phone.

Tim gazed out the massive windows at the Metropolis skyline while he waited for his coffee to cool down enough that he could drink it. He thought for a moment about breaking the silence, but he didn't know what to say to make conversation. After all, it wasn't like he could ask Bruce why he didn't get any sleep last night.

He could, however, see if he could find a hint as to what Batman and the Justice League were up to. Did this have something to do with the meeting with Luthor? Tim pulled his phone out of his pyjama pants pocket and opened his news app. No major story jumped out at him—no city-wide attacks happened last night. So, either the League did something on the down-low that had kept Bruce up all night, or Batman went out for a patrol, and things got out of hand. Maybe he got in a fight with Superman. Tim fought back a smile at that thought and scrolled through the news headlines, curious to see if he could figure it out.

Passengers injured after Metropolis Transit bus collides with dump truck.

Not likely, as the crash only happened two hours ago.

Woman, 26, dead after late-night shooting outside nightclub.

Hm... probably not? Tim skimmed the article. It made no mention of superhero involvement, though he supposed it was possible Batman had intervened. Then Tim noticed that the story had broken yesterday morning, and it was only at the top of his feed because it had been updated twenty minutes ago with a correction about the name of the club.

Stolen vehicles from Greater Metropolis Area found in shipping containers bound for Gotham City.

Again, unlikely. But points for cross-city involvement, he supposed.

Metropolis City Council set to vote on new dog park guidelines.

Definitely not. (Unless the Justice League was really, *really* bored.)

He scrolled down to the next set of headlines with one hand, reaching for his coffee with the other. But he'd barely wrapped his fingers around the handle of his mug when the words on the screen stopped him cold.

Parents of child struck by passenger train speak out against lax regulations.

Tim didn't know the child, hadn't heard this news story. But the headline sent a chill through him, as it brought up the memory of last night's nightmare. Like an overlay on his vision, Tim could suddenly see the scene again, laid out in raw, vivid detail.

He saw a familiar child, his brown eyes lit with excitement as he ran on ahead. Tim was laughing at first, following, trying to keep up, but the little boy was too fast. Tim's laughter faded as they drew nearer to the train tracks, but the kid was so focused on whatever he wanted to show Tim that he didn't notice.

In front of him, the red lights on the train crossing began to flash, and Tim began to get afraid.

He pushed himself forward. His legs were heavy. He couldn't move any faster.

He tried to call out a warning. His voice was breath with no sound.

The train whistle blared. The child didn't hear it.

Tim couldn't save him.

It was all his fault. Tim should have known there'd be a train. He should have stopped the kid, should have warned him to pay more attention. *Tim* should have paid more attention. Why were they so close to the tracks anyway? The child didn't know better, but Tim did, or Tim *should have*, and he didn't, and it was his fault. It was all his—

"Tim?" said Bruce.

Tim gasped, jolted out of his thoughts. His body jerked, and he hissed when something hot splashed across his hand. The side of the mug hit the table with a thump, and Tim realized what had just happened.

"Sorry! I'm so sorry," he blurted out, as his coffee ran onto the pristine white floor in a steady, staining stream. He shoved himself to his feet. "I'll clean that up."

Bruce stopped him, however, stepping into Tim's path like a brick wall materializing from nowhere. "Did you get burned? Let me see," he said.

"What?" said Tim, but Bruce was already inspecting his hand with a frown.

“Better run it under some cool water just in case,” he said.

“But— the floor,” Tim tried to protest, but he had no choice but to follow Bruce to the sink, as Bruce was still holding his wrist.

“The floor can wait,” said Bruce. He flipped on the water and tested the temperature with his fingers. Then he stuck his elbow (*what the fuck?)* into the stream for a second, and pulled Tim’s hand under the tap.

Tim winced, finally fully registering the pain. He watched the pink splotch on the back of his hand turn red as the cool water washed over it.

“Keep it there for a few minutes,” said Bruce, and it wasn’t a suggestion.

Tim watched helplessly from the sink as Bruce unspooled a handful of paper towels and mopped up the mess Tim had just made. He winced when Bruce carried the sodden towels past him to the trash bin.

“I’m sorry,” he said again. “I didn’t mean to.”

“I know,” said Bruce, then he paused, giving Tim a look that was too kind, considering what had just happened. “Don’t worry about it, Tim. It’s just coffee. I’m more concerned about your hand. And... about why it happened.”

Tim averted his eyes, because Bruce was giving him the same serious and significant look that he’d had in the middle of the night when he asked if Tim could tell him what had given him a panic attack. That night, Tim hadn’t answered because he hadn’t known how to explain it. Today, however, Tim wasn’t going to answer because he was afraid of what might happen if he did.

Tim would be out of Wayne Manor, out of the foster system, out of school, in a heartbeat. He’d never get the emancipation he needed. He’d never have a normal life again. If anyone knew the kind of fucked-up things he dreamed about on a regular basis, they’d probably lock him up in Arkham with the other crazies who thought all the time about people getting hurt and killed. Tim *could not* allow that to happen.

It came as a surprise when Bruce backed down. Tim had assumed he would stand there all day until Tim told him what he wanted to know. Instead, Bruce took two careful steps forward and turned off the tap.

He picked up a towel from where it was hanging on the oven door and wrapped it carefully around Tim's hand.

As he patted it dry, Tim thought about that bitterly cold night in February when he'd seen Batman coax a street kid out from where she was hiding behind a dumpster. He'd offered her food, water, even chocolate, but what convinced the kid was warmth. He'd used his cape to bundle her up and carry her to the nearest shelter. It took more convincing to get her to let go. Tim remembered thinking about how warm she must have felt, how safe. He remembered the curious longing that had bloomed in the centre of his chest, and how his bedroom at Mrs. Douglas' had felt so cold and empty when he'd returned to it just before dawn.

"Doesn't seem too bad," Bruce murmured, his eyes on Tim's hand.

Tim didn't know why, but the comment annoyed him. *Of course it isn't bad,* he thought, pulling out of Bruce's grasp.

"It's fine," he said. "The coffee wasn't even boiling."

"Doesn't mean it can't hurt you," Bruce countered. His gentle tone was even more grating than his touch.

"I'm *fine,*" Tim insisted, when what he really wanted to say was, *I don't need your pity*.

After all, he wasn't some street rat who couldn't fend for himself. He'd been watching his own back for years. He'd gotten up close and personal with Gotham's worst; he could handle some spilled fucking coffee.

"Okay," said Bruce, backing off again. "Sit down, I'll get you a new cup."

"No," Tim heard himself say. As much as he desperately wanted the caffeine, what he wanted even more was to get away. He needed to be *anywhere but here* right now. "I'm going back to bed."

He strode past Bruce without looking back, and while he heard Bruce exhale a short breath, he didn't say a word. Tim went straight to his room and shut the door firmly.

He leaned against it and waited, watching the numbers on his alarm clock. When two minutes had passed, he allowed himself to relax. Bruce hadn't followed him and wasn't going to knock.

Which was... a relief? A disappointment? Tim honestly didn't know. Everything in him, from the top of his head to the pit of his stomach, was jumbled and twisted like a bowl of live snakes.

His eyes roved over the bedroom, from his laptop and camera on the small desk in the corner to the open duffle bag on the chair by the bed, to the dirty clothes that littered the floor. The bed was equally messy— and tempting. Tim was *tired,* which he knew, rationally, had something to do with how he was feeling, but he also knew he was too keyed up to try and sleep. If he did...

He shuddered, shaking off the nightmare again.

He wanted *out.* Not just away from Bruce, but out of the penthouse entirely. He wanted fresh air, freedom.

He eyed his camera. The handful of hours he'd been able to wander the city while Bruce was working were the closest he'd gotten to his nighttime excursions in almost a month, since the Parnells caught him returning at 2 in the morning and started staying up late to make sure he didn't sneak out again.

He sighed, pushed off the door and went to his duffle bag to find a clean set of clothes. As he dressed, he wondered what the odds were that Bruce would let him go again if he asked. It had taken some convincing on Friday— and that was when Bruce had a prior commitment and things were peaceable between them. Now, after what had just happened in the kitchen, Tim would be lucky if Bruce wasn't camped outside his door right this minute.

He tidied up some of his laundry, but soon gave up and flopped onto the bed with his phone. He scrolled listlessly through social media, and when that got boring, he downloaded a brainless match-3 game and swiped at it for a while. At the end of every level was an ad long enough that he felt himself nodding off despite the bright colours and annoying sound effects.

He might have even been asleep when a new sound snapped him out of his daze. He perked his head up and listened to the clear footsteps coming down the hall. Bruce was making noise on purpose again.

A memory played at the edges of his mind—angry sounds downstairs and footsteps ascending and the mind-numbing fear that they were coming for him—but Tim suppressed it ruthlessly and stayed still, making his breath as steady and even as possible. If Bruce could hear him ('ears like a bat' wasn't just a clever expression, after all), it

would be best to pretend that he was sleeping. If Bruce knocked, Tim decided, he wouldn't move, wouldn't answer the door.

But Bruce walked on, his footsteps disappearing into the master bedroom. Tim breathed out and let go of some of the tension in his shoulders. He stretched and got to his feet. He went to the window, hoping the natural light would wake him up a little. The sky outside was clear, and though the sun was still low, Metropolis' skyscrapers were already bright. Tim glanced down at the street, dozens of storeys below him. There was hardly any traffic and very few pedestrians.

He *really* wanted to get out there.

Maybe he could just knock on Bruce's door and ask. But Bruce would probably want to talk about what happened in the kitchen first. And even if he didn't, he'd definitely give Tim another lecture about safety on the streets, which boiled down to *Don't go anywhere without your phone,* and *Don't talk to strangers.* Like Tim was five years old or something. Just the thought of it was exhausting.

Then he heard the shower start up in the master bedroom's ensuite bathroom, and Tim got a *terrible* idea.

He couldn't.

He *shouldn't.*

He was going to do it anyway.

Easier to beg forgiveness...

He put his camera in his backpack, along with his keys and wallet. He slid his phone into his pocket. The battery was only at 57 percent, he noticed with a savage sort of pleasure.

From the kitchen, he grabbed a banana and threw that in his bag as well. He looked longingly at the coffee as he stepped into his shoes. Then he listened for another second to make sure the water was still running.

It was.

He left.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

> Tim Drake's day out, AKA the day Bruce Wayne's gray hairs get gray hairs.
>
> *After a second, Bruce realized there was absolutely no sound on the other side of the door— no rustling or faint music. Not even breathing, which made the alarm bells in his head get even louder.*
>
> *"Tim?" he called again, just in case. "I'm coming in, okay?"*
>
> *He waited a beat, then pushed open the door, only to find the room completely empty.*

Chapter Notes

> Huge, enormous thanks to my best friend and partner in fandom chasm_side for her encyclopedic camera knowledge!!

Tim's door was slightly ajar when Bruce emerged from the bedroom, showered and shaved and ready to give the morning a do-over. He hoped Tim would feel the same.

He approached the bedroom door cautiously, not wanting to startle Tim if he was right on the other side, and knocked lightly on the frame.

"Tim?" he called softly.

There was no reply. He took a fortifying breath and pressed on.

"I thought maybe we could go out for breakfast. What do you say?" he asked, because the only way Tim was going to open up about what had happened in the kitchen was if Bruce kept the lines of communication open and reassured Tim that he wanted to be in his presence no matter what.

But his suggestion was met with silence.

"My friend Clark recommended a great spot over on 39th Street," Bruce went on. "Apparently, they have stuffed French toast."

Still nothing.

It occurred to Bruce that, because the door was open when it had been closed before, Tim might not actually be in the room. He may have stepped out briefly and not pulled it fully shut behind him. But Bruce could already see that the bathroom across the hall was empty.

Rather than invade Tim's space by opening the door, Bruce walked away. He checked the living room, then passed by the front door to enter the kitchen and dining nook, where they'd sat earlier. Tim wasn't in either place. His empty mug, which Bruce had left on the table in case he came back, was untouched.

Suppressing the growing sense that something was wrong, Bruce went back down the hall to the bedrooms. He knocked again, a little harder. Maybe Tim had his headphones on, or he'd gone back to sleep.

But after a second, Bruce realized there was absolutely no sound on the other side of the door— no rustling or faint music. Not even breathing, which made the alarm bells in his head get even louder.

"Tim?" he called again, just in case. "I'm coming in, okay?"

He waited a beat, then pushed open the door, only to find the room completely empty.

"Tim?"

Bruce felt his heart rate accelerating. He made a conscious effort to slow it down as he stepped inside. His eyes swept the room as thoroughly as if it were a crime scene, cataloguing what he saw:

Laptop on the desk, open but powered off.

No phone, keys or wallet in sight.

Unmade bed, dirty clothes on the floor.

No backpack.

No camera bag.

"Dammit," he said under his breath, but just to be sure, he opened the closet door. As expected, it was bare and unoccupied.

He left the room and walked briskly—he didn't run—to the front door, where the sense of wrongness had started a moment ago. He saw now what he'd only been peripherally aware of before: Tim's shoes weren't on the rack where they had been all night. Bruce spun on his heel and

started to pace, running a hand over his eyes.

Not again. The words were like a drumbeat, a refrain in the back of his mind that kept increasing in speed and volume. *Not again, notagain, NOTA—*

He shook himself. If he was going to find Tim, he had to keep calm and remain objective, so he could see the whole picture. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes to review what he knew so far:

Tim hadn't been gone long. Even if he'd left as soon as Bruce went into his bedroom to have a shower, that had been less than twenty minutes ago.

Tim had left of his own accord, without violence or coercion.

Tim had no access to a vehicle, so he was likely on foot.

Tim had already proven that he was able to keep himself safe in Metropolis alone, on foot, for short periods of time.

Ergo, there was no cause for alarm. No need to ask Barbara to hack the city's CCTV cameras or ask Clark to lend a listening ear. Tim was probably fine.

So was Jason when he left.

"Dammit!" Bruce said again, because he'd been calm and objective before, and it hadn't done him any goddamn good.

Tim was out there, alone, wandering around an unfamiliar city, possibly still panicking from whatever had happened in the kitchen earlier. From the penthouse, he could have gone in any direction, and he had a head start.

Bruce lifted his own shoes down from the rack, but he'd only gotten one on when his phone rang in his pocket. Startled, he fumbled it out and answered it without registering the caller ID.

"Tim?"

It wasn't Tim. "Wow," said Dick, voice dry. "Way to make me feel wanted."

"Sorry," Bruce said automatically. He patted his other pocket for his keys and realized they were still on his nightstand. With a frustrated sigh, he pulled his one shoe off again and crossed the carpeted living

room back to the hallway.

“What’s wrong?” Dick asked, now serious.

“Nothing,” Bruce lied.

“Please,” Dick scoffed. “What’s going on?”

Bruce picked up his keys with a louder rattle than was necessary. “I’m just about to head out.”

“Oh,” said Dick, surprised. “Alfred told me your train didn’t get in till 4.” He paused, clearly waiting for an explanation, but Bruce didn’t give him one. “That’s why I was calling. I wanted to know if we were still having dinner at 6? Because if not, I could use some sleep.”

Bruce glanced over his shoulder at the alarm clock as he left the bedroom. “You haven’t been to bed yet,” he guessed.

“Kinda... not since Friday,” Dick admitted.

“Dick.” Bruce could hear the rebuke in his tone, but he was out before he could stop it. “Why didn’t you ask for help?”

“I had help,” Dick protested, tinged with some of that familiar strain that came when they talked too long about work. (Or when they worked together too long. Or, sometimes, just when they were in the same room for too long. Bruce sighed silently.) “Wally’s here. I’m fine, B. Just tired.”

Me too, thought Bruce, deciding not to tell Dick that he also hadn’t slept a wink last night.

“Well, we could reschedule,” he said, as he began to put on his shoes again. “Or I could change our tickets, do dinner later than usual. I might need to do that anyway, if I can’t find Tim,” he added, more to himself than to Dick.

Dick huffed a laugh that crackled over the phone speaker. “What, did you lose him?” He waited a beat, then said, “Oh, shit. You lost him.”

“Language,” Bruce said absently, though his heart rate was climbing again.

“Bruce,” said Dick seriously. “You let him— how long has he been gone?”

“Fifteen minutes. Twenty at most,” Bruce answered. He opened the front door and stepped into the hall. “And I didn’t *let* him do anything. He left the penthouse while I was in the shower.”

“Oh,” said Dick again. There was another pause. “Well, he can’t have gotten too far, then.”

Bruce knew Dick well enough to know that he’d chosen those words and that tone on purpose to calm him down. As much as it irked Bruce to feel like Dick was ‘handling’ him, this wasn’t the time.

“My thoughts exactly,” he agreed. He locked the door using only his key, leaving the biometrics by the wayside. If Tim beat him back here, he needed to be able to get in on his own. “I just have to catch up to him.”

“You will,” said Dick with far too much conviction— more handling. “Text me later. When you find him.”

“Yeah,” said Bruce, hitting the button to call the elevator. He lowered the phone, then thought twice and brought it back to his ear. “Thanks, Dick. Get some rest.”

“Yeah,” Dick echoed, and disconnected.

The elevator was going to be another few seconds, so Bruce opened his contacts. He selected Tim’s number and hit the call button.

The line rang once, then went to an automatic voicemail greeting.

Bruce let out a breath and hung up while it was still reciting Tim’s number. If Tim was screening his calls, that was probably a good thing. Bruce could handle Tim choosing not to talk to him if it meant he was okay and still had cell service.

He came back every time, he heard himself say to Alfred, on Tim’s first night at the manor. *He was late, and he got in trouble, but he always came home.*

Bruce opened the messaging app while the elevator began its descent. *Tim,* he typed, then deleted it. Too harsh. He started over.

Hey, where are you?

Even harsher. He deleted that, too.

Hey, bud.

No.

Hi Tim, can you let me know where you went?

Better. Good enough, he decided. He sent it.

Almost immediately, the message's icon changed from 'delivered' to 'read.' But Tim didn't answer, and Bruce realized his mistake.

I'm not mad at you, he typed quickly, and sent that, too. Then he grimaced because, if he was in Tim's position, there was no way he'd believe that without any evidence.

I just want to know you're okay, he added. He waited, tapping the fingers of his free hand against his thigh until the elevator doors opened.

The first message remained 'read'. The others just showed 'delivered'. There was still no reply.

All right, he decided, as he stepped out into the lobby. He'd give himself ten minutes of doing this the old-fashioned way, and then he was calling Barbara.

And maybe Clark. Just in case.

Tim was about to give the barista his order when Bruce called. *That was fast,* he thought, but he wasn't all that surprised.

He declined the call, apologized to the barista, and ordered a large dark roast coffee. She gave him the look that a lot of café employees gave him— the one that said they'd expected him to order chocolate milk or something. Her eyebrows went up even further when he told her he didn't need room in the cup for dairy.

He handed her the $20 bill he'd withdrawn from the ATM on the corner and dropped some of the change into the tip jar. As he did, he thought again about how he was probably going to have to do something about his money soon. The bank account he'd had since he was ten years old was still in the black, but it'd been almost a year since his parents had given him a monthly infusion of more money than a 14-year-old would ever probably need. And, unless Tim got a job, there wouldn't be any more deposits going forward.

He still had enough for at least six more months of phone bills, but

there'd be significantly less if he had to hire his own lawyer, rather than relying on the much-slower-but-free community legal services for the emancipation that would get him out of the foster system. And if *that* went according to plan, well, then Tim supposed he would have to start supporting himself.

And soon, he thought, as his phone buzzed with a polite *Where the hell are you?* text from Bruce. (Not that he put it in those words, of course, but Tim could read between the lines.) Tim would be lucky if he saw the inside of Wayne Manor again after pulling a stunt like this. Hell, he'd be lucky if Bruce bothered to put him back on the train to Gotham and didn't just leave him here to rot.

It'd been a reckless, stupid decision to leave without permission, and he knew that now. (He'd known it then, too.) But as he waited for his coffee in the morning sun, he found he didn't regret it too much. Annoying Bruce Wayne into pushing him off to another foster home wasn't Tim's favourite plan to get out of Batman's house and off his radar, but it was still a plan, and he could deal with it.

(And if that curious, painful longing rose in his chest again at the thought of walking away, well, he'd just have to deal with that, too.)

He only wished he'd thought to grab his laptop on the way out. He was disappointed, frustrated in himself for leaving it behind. He knew better. For months now, he hadn't gone anywhere without it, afraid that his guardians or their kids would steal it— or, worse, they'd look at it and learn his secrets. He would have to be more careful in the future, no matter how tired he was, not to leave things behind.

Maybe Batman would hack it, he thought. Maybe he'd find the proof that Tim knew everything about him and lock Tim up in his basement to make sure his secret identity stayed safe. That wouldn't be so bad, Tim decided, as the barista handed over his coffee. At least then he wouldn't have to worry about money or gym class or college ever again. And no one would try to toss him in Arkham for the thoughts that ran through his head and his dreams, because Batman would already be on top of that, keeping an eye on him to make sure he didn't become Gotham's next supervillain.

His phone buzzed a couple more times, but Tim dismissed the notifications without reading Bruce's messages and pulled up the Metropolis Transit app. There was a great park eighteen blocks from here that he'd discovered on his first day in the city. According to the transit app, a streetcar was coming in just over three minutes— no,

wait, there it was, already on the horizon.

Tim left the café, looked both ways and jaywalked—jayjogged, more like—across five lanes of traffic to get to the stop in time to board. He paid with the tap-and-pay card he'd bought on Friday, which still had a few bucks on it. Bruce had bought him another one—in a much higher denomination—when they went to the aquarium, and Tim had swapped them out when he wasn't looking, which in retrospect was an excellent idea. Now that he would be stuck in Metropolis—until either CPS found him or he could get himself a train ticket—it would be handy to have an extra transit pass at his disposal.

Maybe he wouldn't go back to Gotham at all, he thought, as the streetcar carried him east. Metropolis seemed like a nice place. It had a little less… *character,* maybe, but that might not be a bad thing. Tim could deal with it. Maybe he'd start a Superman blog, try to figure out his secret identity next. How hard could it be?

He got off the streetcar and stopped just before the archway that marked the entrance to the park. The path was deserted, just as he'd hoped, and the light was good. Not hazy like it would be later in the day… or in Gotham. He set his coffee down on a nearby bench and took off his backpack to get out his camera. It was a mirrorless Fuji, from the higher end of the XT series. He'd picked it up relatively cheap from a reseller online a couple years ago. It'd come with a standard kit lens, but he'd splurged on a longer one that was better for bat- and bird-watching.

Today, though, he didn't care about long range shots. He took a few moments to affix the standard lens and screw in a half-decent polarized filter. Then he crouched on the pavement and angled the shot up. A robin—the bird kind—had just landed on the wrought-iron entrance to the park. For several seconds, Tim focused on balancing the exposure to try and get some detail in the bird's silhouette without blowing out the sky behind it. When the bird fluttered off, Tim got to his feet to scroll back through the shots he'd just taken.

Perfect, he thought with a smile, and something in him relaxed. He might be a screw-up in all the ways that counted, but at least he was pretty good at this.

With his camera around his neck and his backpack on his back, he picked up his coffee again and wandered the park's criss-crossing pathways. He paused by green-rusted copper statues of war heroes, photographing some, idly reading the plaques of others. He

experimented with low angles, shooting up to catch the tops of the skyscrapers as they burned gold with the climbing sun. He set his camera down on the pavement at one point, and a pigeon landed right in front of it. He laughed and drank the rest of his coffee while he waited for the bird to walk on. A few minutes later, he carried his empty cup to the trash, marvelling that the park's bins were neat, not overflowing, and with no sign of any used needles.

He looked up and noticed two men standing and talking near a tree. Tim didn't think anything of it at first, then he looked again. They were an odd couple. One of them had a pristine suit and tie with a silver clip. His shoes shone without a speck of mud, despite the damp grass all around him. His companion, on the other hand, wore ripped jeans and a fraying jacket. His brown leather boots were scuffed. At first glance, Tim would have guessed that he was unhoused, and that the man in the suit was talking to him on behalf of a city shelter. But his clothes didn't have that worn-in look that meant he had been wearing them for days. And his boots may have been scuffed, but they were intact, without a single hole. Everything he was wearing was a disguise meant to fool someone into overlooking him, and it very nearly worked.

Nearly, because Tim was from Gotham, and he'd seen enough shady deals in back alleys at midnight to recognize that that's what he was seeing, even if it was in broad daylight at a beautifully maintained public park. (Apparently, even crime was high-class in Metropolis.)

The men hadn't noticed him, so Tim scanned his surroundings. There was a man reading a newspaper on a bench about fifty feet away, and a lady in a hot pink exercise outfit much closer, coming down the path with a tiny dog on a leash. Tim didn't really like tiny dogs, but he decided to take the opportunity that the universe had handed him. He held up his camera and gave her a friendly wave. She stopped exactly where he wanted her, with the shady men in the background, and took out one of her earbuds. Her dog sniffed eagerly at Tim's ankles.

Tim gave her his best gala smile, introduced himself, and explained that he was working on a project for a photography class he was taking at summer school. He wondered if he could please take a picture of her dog? Maybe over here, by the trash bin, to show the 'urban fabric' that his teacher was so obsessed with?

The woman smiled and agreed, and Tim thanked her profusely before stepping back and crouching to get the dog in frame. He snapped two perfect pictures of the dog—assuming that the woman would want to

see them—then apologized because he was still figuring out the focus on the camera that he'd rented from the A/V department, and could she please just stay put for another second?

"Sure, take your time," she said. (Everyone in Metropolis was so nice.)

He had adjusted the settings while he'd been talking, and quickly snapped a number of pictures of the men in the background. He couldn't tell, as he was taking them, whether they'd be good enough to make out their features in any clear detail, but he definitely captured the moment when the man in the suit passed his companion a discreet handful of folded bills.

Tim thanked the lady and got to his feet, scrolling back to the two shots he'd taken of her dog. She exclaimed that they were adorable, and asked if he would mind emailing them to her. He agreed and typed her address into his phone, then thanked her again and patted her annoying little dog on the head before they carried on down the path.

Tim smiled, watching them go. In his peripheral vision, the two men seemed to be wrapping up their business. Ahead of him on the path, there was a rustle from the man on the bench with the newspaper. Tim looked down at his camera and started scrolling through the pictures as he walked away.

Bruce watched Tim from around the edges of his newspaper.

He'd gotten his first lead on Tim's location—and state of wellbeing—within seven minutes of leaving the penthouse. An observant (and chatty) barista knew exactly who Bruce was talking about when he described Tim. Apparently, he'd stood out because she thought it was weird that 'a *literal* child' (her words) had ordered a large black coffee and then ran across five lanes of traffic to get on the 601 streetcar.

Bruce had panicked a little at that— not only because *five lanes of traffic?!* but also because the 601 connected to eight different bus routes, two of which could take Tim to the train station in the downtown core, and one that could get him to the airport.

Then Bruce spotted a park along the route with user-provided images that looked familiar. He trusted his hunch and hopped off the streetcar, and there was Tim, standing in front of one of the park's war memorials, casually reading the plaque and sipping his (way-too-big) cup of coffee.

Bruce had been tempted to walk right up to Tim and confront him, but a few seconds of thought convinced him that might not be a good idea. For one thing, he didn't know what he would say if he did, and he didn't trust himself to say the right thing off-the-cuff. Not when he was more emotionally compromised than he'd been in a while. Part of him wanted to yell—because seriously what had Tim been thinking, taking off like that?—but another part wanted to throw his arms around Tim in pure relief. And Bruce didn't know Tim well enough yet to know how he'd react to either of those things. If Tim was anything like Jason, he'd take off again, to push the boundaries but also at least a little out of spite. If Tim was anything like Dick, he'd bend himself in half not to make Bruce feel like that again... which, as they'd both had to learn over the years, wasn't the best reaction.

So, while Bruce tried to think of what he would say to Tim, he'd fallen back on what felt familiar— watching from the outskirts, making sure to remain unseen while keeping his mark in sight at all times. He'd been following Tim around the park for close to forty minutes now, watching him wander the paths and take pictures. Tim hadn't spoken to anyone or taken an interest in anything other than wildlife and scenery, until that woman and her dog came along.

Watching Tim talk to her was like watching an actor step into a role. Tim smiled and laughed and made apologetic faces as he fiddled with his camera. It was a high-society gala all over again. How many times had Bruce seen the Drakes with their smiling, polite child and never guessed at what was going on behind the scenes?

Bruce lowered the newspaper a little to see more, and that was when he noticed two men hanging out by a tree just a bit behind the woman and her dog. He blinked, realizing with a start that he recognized both of those men. One was Dr. Sebastian Cronin, Luthor's interim head of biotechnology, whom Bruce had met just yesterday. The other was Gabriel Lavaste, a Falcone gang enforcer who was supposed to be awaiting trial in Blackgate right now. Bruce knew that, because he'd put the man there himself two weeks ago.

Holy shit, was Bruce's first thought.

I need to get Tim out of here, was his second.

But Tim seemed to be handling that part just fine by himself. He was showing the woman the photos he'd taken and patting her dog on the head and waving farewell. Then, with a real smile on his face and his eyes glued to the camera display, his feet started moving in Bruce's

direction.

Bruce considered his options. There were really only two: he could keep following Tim, or he could reveal himself. The wanted criminal just a hundred yards away from them made that choice pretty easy.

He folded the newspaper and set it on the bench beside him, then turned in Tim's direction and waited.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Bruce catches up to Tim.

For one second, Tim was tempted to run. He wasn't the most athletic kid on the planet, but he was fast when he needed to be. Not as fast as Batman, of course, but maybe he could outrun him while he was wearing Bruce Wayne's shiny shoes.

Chapter Notes

Posting early because it's a holiday, and I have a busy work week ahead of me. Also, I've rewritten this chapter from scratch twice, and frankly I'm tired of looking at it! I hope you enjoy.

Tim's shots of the shady business deal in the park were pretty good, he thought. Not great, but not bad. He'd at least managed to get one where the shabbily-dressed man's face was illuminated by the sun, and the money exchange was plain as day.

Tim didn't know what he would do with these pictures yet, but it gave him a sense of satisfaction, just knowing that he had them. Maybe later, he could look at them more closely on his laptop and figure out — *shit.* He might not be able to do that, actually, since he'd left his laptop behind. Well, once CPS sent someone to track him down in Metropolis, he could—

"Hello, Tim," said a voice.

Tim stopped dead in his tracks. Slowly, starting with his eyes, then his neck and shoulders, all the way down to his feet, Tim turned to his right to find Bruce seated on a park bench just five feet back from the path, a folded newspaper at his side.

For one second, Tim was tempted to run. He wasn't the most athletic kid on the planet, but he was fast when he needed to be. Not as fast as Batman, of course, but maybe he could outrun him while he was wearing Bruce Wayne's shiny shoes.

But that second passed, and Tim took in the expression on Bruce's face. He was smiling, but it was strained, tinged with something else. Sadness? Disappointment? Frustration? Tim couldn't guess.

“Are you all right?” Bruce asked, while Tim continued to stare.

Wordlessly, Tim nodded. He knew he should say something—he was the one who’d decided that it was easier to beg forgiveness—but he couldn’t get a single word past his throat.

“I’m glad,” said Bruce. “You had me worried, disappearing like that.”

Tim bobbed his head again, but his eyes dropped to his feet. He realized that he hadn’t thought at all about Bruce’s reaction to his leaving. That probably made him every bit as selfish as his mother always said he was, and Bruce was no doubt going to tell him the exact same thing any minute now.

“Do you want to sit down?” Bruce asked, shuffling over on the bench somewhat.

I’d rather just get this over with, Tim thought, but he knew better than to say something like that. He settled at one end of the bench and waited for the hammer to fall.

Because it was going to. There was no way that Bruce wasn’t about to let him have it. Tim’s only comfort in this moment came from the fact that Bruce couldn’t go full Batman on him here in public. But maybe he’d finally tell Tim outright that he knew about Tim’s nighttime hobby and didn’t approve. After all, Tim’s parents had always been good at remembering other times he messed up when they got him in trouble. No reason to think Bruce wouldn’t do the same.

Except… several seconds had passed, and Bruce hadn’t said anything. He hadn’t asked for an explanation or demanded an apology or outlined a plan for his punishment.

Tim dared to look up, then cautiously over to his left. When his eyes landed on Bruce, Bruce smiled again. His eyes crinkled at the corners this time.

“You back with me?” he asked quietly.

Oh no, Tim thought. Had Bruce been talking this entire time, and Tim hadn’t been listening? What if Bruce asked him to repeat parts of his lecture? His father loved to do that, and a couple of his foster parents had, too.

“I’m sorry,” he blurted, since that was his safest bet in this situation.

“Okay,” said Bruce, his face falling slightly. His tone stayed gentle. “It’s okay, Tim. If you need another minute, you just go ahead and take it.”

“I— what?” Tim was completely baffled now.

“Do you want to try a grounding exercise?” said Bruce. “Or maybe a distraction would help? I could talk about something silly, if you like.” He paused like he was waiting for Tim to answer, but when Tim didn’t speak, he went on. “We have this new intern at the office, and the other day—”

He kept talking, while Tim kept staring in utter disbelief. Was— was Batman *babbling?* What kind of alternate universe had Tim fallen into in the last few minutes?

But, weirdly, it helped. After a moment, Tim stopped worrying about what Bruce was *going* to say and instead focused on what Bruce was *actually* saying, even if it was unimportant. Tim nodded along as Bruce explained how the new intern was a finance whiz, but clueless about everything that didn’t involve quarterly projections. Tim smiled at his misadventures with the coffeemaker in the break room, and chuckled at his attempts to set up the A/V equipment for a presentation.

“Then when he actually managed that, it turned out he left his phone at his desk, down on the eighteenth floor,” Bruce concluded. “So he couldn’t do the two-factor authentication to get into the shared drive from the boardroom computer. We all had to wait another fifteen minutes for him to go get it.”

“Who leaves their phone at their desk?” Tim asked.

“Right?” Bruce agreed, and Tim didn’t think he was imagining the relief in his laugh.

After a moment, Bruce asked, “Feeling any better?”

Tim found himself nodding. “Yeah, actually. Thanks,” he added quickly. “And... sorry. For taking off.”

“Okay,” Bruce said, serious but kind. “I want to talk some more, but I think we should eat something first. You up for that?”

Tim didn’t really know why Bruce was asking, since he’d already said that he thought it was the best thing to do, but he nodded again and got up from the bench when Bruce did. Bruce laid a hesitant hand on

Tim's shoulder to guide him to the right, and they followed the path for a few minutes before Tim got up the courage to ask one of the questions racing through his mind.

"How did you find me?"

Bruce explained that the barista had ratted him out, and said he'd recognized some of the landmarks of this park from the pictures Tim had shown him yesterday. There was a slight emphasis in the way that he said that, and Tim quickly read between the lines.

"Oh," he said, awkward. "Yeah."

Okay, so he was in *big* trouble, because there was now no hiding the fact that he'd gone beyond Bruce's ten-block radius before today.

Bruce's hand briefly rested on Tim's shoulder again. "Yeah," he echoed lightly. "I think there's a food truck over by the south entrance that serves waffles. Do you like waffles?"

"I like waffles," said Tim numbly.

"Great," said Bruce, and he started talking again. He told Tim about how, not that long ago, Dick tried to make a waffle out of candy like he'd seen in a video online, but the video must have been a hoax or something, because all he had to show for it was a destroyed waffle maker and the stench of burning sugar.

"Sometimes I swear I can still smell it," Bruce said with a shudder. "I don't think Alfred will ever forgive him. That waffle maker was almost as old as I am, and apparently they don't make them like they used to."

Tim nodded. As they got closer to the food truck, he could catch the scent of waffles on the breeze. His stomach gave an eager grumble. He'd forgotten to eat the banana he'd packed before leaving the penthouse, and coffee just wasn't filling. Still, he didn't know if he'd be able to eat, given the anxiety that was starting to build in his chest again.

While Bruce wondered aloud about the menu options, another one of Tim's questions popped out of his mouth before he was ready for it.

"*Why* did you find me?"

Bruce stopped talking at once, his sharp gaze falling on Tim. His

mouth worked silently for a second. Then, to Tim's surprise, he dropped down to one knee to meet Tim's eye.

"Tim, I found you because you needed finding," he said, levelly and not at all angry. "Because I was concerned. Because I'm responsible for you, and I need to take you home in a few hours."

"Back to Gotham," said Tim. He didn't know if he meant that as a correction or what, but it was what he said.

"Yes," Bruce said patiently. He waited a beat, in case Tim had more to say, then exhaled softly through his nose. "Can I—" he said, then hesitated. "Can I give you a hug?"

"Um." Tim didn't think anybody had ever asked him that before— or, not with those exact words, anyway. "Okay."

A smile flickered across Bruce's face before he opened his arms and shifted slightly forward. And then. Then Tim was being hugged. By *Batman.*

It took him a moment to react, to raise his arms and hug him back, but the second his hands made contact with Bruce's probably-really-expensive shirt, Tim felt unexpected and embarrassing tears well up in his eyes. He didn't know why. It reminded him of the moment that always came towards the end of his nightmares, the moment when he'd started to realize that he was dreaming, but he couldn't do anything to stop it. That was always when he started to cry, because the guilt hit him the hardest in that moment, and it started to hurt even more.

If Bruce noticed the tears when he pulled back, he didn't call attention to them. Instead, he told Tim again that he was really glad he was alright and asked if he wanted to try the strawberry chocolate chip waffle.

Tim discreetly wiped his eyes and said, "Yeah. That sounds good."

Bruce followed close behind Tim as he led the way towards a picnic table in the shade. Bruce could admit that he was maybe, possibly, kind of being a little bit paranoid, but he couldn't help not wanting to let Tim out of his sight.

Tim had been quiet since they left the food truck, responding to Bruce's offer of another (decaf) coffee with a polite *yes, please* and

thank you, but at least he didn't seem to be panicking or dissociating again. Bruce's stomach had dropped, earlier, when Tim sat down on the bench beside him and proceeded to stare at nothing with glassy, unseeing eyes for more than a minute. It was exactly the same as what had happened in the penthouse, and while Bruce couldn't think of an obvious trigger for that incident, it was pretty clear that surprising Tim in the park had brought about this one. He wished he hadn't chosen to confront him that way, especially since it hadn't actually been necessary— Lavaste had walked away without any incident, leaving Bruce to deal with a mess of his own making.

He'd done his best. He *was doing* his best. It had been such a relief when Tim actually looked at him... only to jump right into an apology as soon as Bruce spoke to him. Tim had reacted like— well, like a traumatized child, and Bruce had a little experience with that.

Breathing and grounding exercises had worked for Jason. He was often just a hairsbreadth away from flying off the handle, so a reminder to take a breath almost never went awry. Touch worked, too, once he'd learned that not all close contact had to be violent. A weighted blanket—when Bruce could get him to hold still long enough to use it—was helpful. But Bruce didn't have a weighted blanket today, and he didn't know how Tim would react to unexpected physical contact. Also, Tim wasn't panicking like he had been the other night, so breathing didn't seem to be a problem.

Then Bruce had remembered Dick's early days at the manor— the nightmares that, unlike Tim, Dick didn't know how to hide. Bruce remembered Alfred telling Dick silly stories in the middle of the night to distract him and help him get back to sleep. It had taken Bruce a few tries before he felt comfortable enough to take over for Alfred—and sometimes Dick preferred Alfred's stories, anyway. They were admittedly more inventive; Bruce's stories were more like inane office chit-chat and society gossip rather than adventures filled with princesses and pirates with sassy back-talking parrots on their shoulders. But the point was that it worked.

And it worked today, pulling Tim out of whatever spiral he'd fallen into.

Still, Bruce wished Alfred was here as he took a seat opposite Tim at the picnic table and slid one of the paper plates over. In exchange, Tim handed him one of the sets of disposable cutlery and the coffee cup that wasn't marked with a 'D' for 'decaf.'

It turned out that there was no dignified way to eat a waffle with a wooden knife and fork, so that took up most of Bruce's attention for the next few minutes. He hadn't realized just how hungry he was, what with being distracted by Tim's disappearance. On the other side of the table, Tim seemed to having a similar experience, digging in as best he could. Bruce watched him eat, grateful that Tim was here, and Tim was safe, and soon they would be going home.

Back to Gotham, Tim had said, and the words stuck like a splinter in Bruce's mind. He knew, logically, that Tim wouldn't be calling the manor 'home' for a while yet—if he even ever got there—but still. It stung to hear it out loud.

Tim's question—*why did you find me?*—hurt even more. Did he think that Bruce would just wait at the penthouse for him to come back? Or maybe he expected Bruce to call the authorities? Bruce couldn't begin to guess, but it sure felt like Tim thought he wasn't worth Bruce's effort, and it was hard not to take that personally. Even though Bruce hadn't known Tim very long, it felt like some kind of failure that Tim was so convinced that Bruce wouldn't even look for him.

It *was* a failure, he decided after another moment's thought, but it wasn't only his. Maybe, up until today, none of the parents in Tim's life would have bothered to look.

Bruce blinked furiously down at his waffle. It was strange and unsettling, this feeling of being unprepared and inadequate. He wondered why and how he'd gotten himself into this. (He knew why. He knew how.) What he didn't know was what to do next.

He knew what he *wasn't* going to do. He wasn't going to give up on this kid, or make Tim think that he wasn't going to come after him next time, if there was a next time. (And every time, if there were a lot of next times.)

Still, he knew he needed to talk to Tim about the rule-breaking. And the taking off. And probably, eventually, about the nightmares.

One step at a time, he told himself, recalling something Dinah said to him about how slow progress was still progress.

"Tim," he began. To his surprise, Tim stopped him right there.

"I know," he said. "I broke the rules about how far I was supposed to go to take pictures."

Bruce nodded slowly. “Do you mind telling me why?”

The question seemed to surprise Tim, and he took a moment to think before answering. “I didn’t really plan to,” he said, and shrugged. “I got to the tenth block, and then I just... kinda kept going.”

It felt like the truth, though Bruce reminded himself that if Tim had deliberately flaunted the rules out of spite, he probably wouldn’t say so. Was it worse, if Tim didn’t care enough about Bruce’s rules one way or the other?

“I didn’t think you’d find out,” Tim went on, an apologetic note in his voice. “I didn’t mean to come back here today.”

Bruce hummed thoughtfully. “Did you mean to go somewhere else?”

Another shrug. “Not really.”

Tim waited, tense on the other side of the table, like this was an interrogation and not a conversation. Bruce made an effort to loosen his posture, and picked up his fork to go back to eating. After a moment, Tim followed suit.

While he ate the last bit of his waffle, Bruce thought about what Tim had just said. On the one hand, he was glad that Tim hadn’t formulated some complicated plan to sneak out unnoticed and get on a bus or train that would take him who-knew-where. But on the other hand, Bruce knew enough about chance encounters in a city to know how easy it was to wander blindly into trouble. Tim could have been hurt, and Bruce wouldn’t even know where to start looking.

He took a breath. He touched the picnic table, listened to the birds singing in the trees, and focused his eyes on the ‘D’ scrawled across Tim’s coffee cup. Tim was here. Tim was safe. He took another breath.

“Why did you leave?” he asked.

Tim’s shoulders twitched like he was stopping himself from shrugging again. He didn’t answer. Bruce let the silence stretch between them for a long moment before he broke it.

“You can tell me if I did something to upset you,” he said softly.

That earned Bruce a direct look— with wide, surprised eyes. Tim shook his head. “It wasn’t you,” he said, but then he frowned.

Bruce guessed at the rest. It was painfully familiar. “Not *just* me, huh?”

Tim looked down at his plate again, and Bruce took advantage of his inattention to compose himself. The grief—usually so tightly contained—had been struggling to break free since he first found Tim’s bedroom empty, and now it clawed at the base of his throat.

Relax, old man, it wasn’t just *you. You think I don’t have other shit going on in my life?*

That was what Jason had said when Bruce found him in a youth shelter. Bruce found him there three more times before he told Bruce what he was looking for out on the streets. And once Jason used the Batcomputer to verify the the intel he’d found, he’d gone straight to the airport and booked a one-way flight to Tel Aviv. If Bruce had gone after him that night, if he’d left the moment Alfred told him Jason was gone, if he hadn’t opted to follow the Joker instead....

“Are you okay?” said Tim, drawing him out of his memories.

Shit, Bruce thought. He couldn’t put this on Tim. Any of this. The kid was already feeling bad enough.

Bruce nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m okay.”

He took a deep breath and put the grief away again as he got to his feet and circled around to Tim’s side of the table. He sat backwards on the bench beside him, facing out into the park to give Tim—and, who was he kidding, himself—a means of avoiding eye contact if he felt the need.

“Look, I get it,” he began. “When I was your age, there were a lot of times when I didn’t want to talk to anybody, and I just needed to get away.”

Tim didn’t say anything. Bruce could tell he was listening, and that made it harder, because he didn’t like saying things like this even when no one was around to hear him. It was like pulling teeth, but he pressed on.

“Some days, I still feel like that,” he confessed. “And when I do, I run, too.”

He chanced a glance in Tim’s direction. Tim had a look of complete confusion on his face. Bruce shrugged, knowing that he probably

couldn't explain it any better than Tim could.

"So I get it," he repeated. "But that doesn't mean I'm not going to worry every single time. Just like Alfred worries about me every single time."

"I didn't mean to make you worry," said Tim in a small voice.

"I know," said Bruce with a smile. "But it's my job to worry about you, so I'd probably be doing it anyway."

"Oh," said Tim, and he seemed to fall deep in thought.

Bruce waited a moment, but when it became clear that Tim wasn't going to say anything more, he decided they could probably leave it there for today. Someday, hopefully, Tim would trust him with his panic and his nightmares. Hopefully, Bruce would have a little more lead time and a lot more sleep before they had that conversation.

For now, however, it was time to take him home.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Family dinner at Wayne Manor.

Dick was sleep-deprived and nursing several bruises, but he was here, prepared to make an honest effort. For Alfred... but also for Tim. Because, seriously. It'd only been a week, and the kid had already tried to run away. Clearly, Bruce needed all the help he could get.

Chapter Notes

Welcome, welcome, welcome to the Highly Anticipated Dick Grayson! Many thanks again to chasm, my resident Nightwing expert, for her vast knowledge of DC canon and her encouragement to write in Dick's POV. (Also the camera stuff. Always the camera stuff.)

Just a heads-up that I will be taking a few weeks off before posting chapter 14. I got bogged down in rewrites (and rewrites of the rewrites of the rewrites...) back in chapter 12, so I need a little time to get ahead. Hopefully I'll be back no later than the first week of April. Until then, please enjoy this longest chapter to date and thank you as ever for your patience and encouragement!

In the ten seconds or so that it took for the gates of Wayne Manor to open, Dick Grayson entertained a very vivid fantasy of going home.

His hand was already on the gear shift, his foot on the brake. A little pressure, a squeeze and a push to put the car in reverse, then he'd crank the wheel and back out onto the road. It would take fifteen minutes to get on the freeway. Forty to Blüdhaven, probably less with Sunday night traffic. He could be back in his apartment in under an hour. He could call Bruce when he arrived, claim he'd been asleep. Maybe he wouldn't notice that Dick's code had been used on the front gate. Not likely, but by then it would already be too late to do anything about it. Maybe Dick could get away with it.

But then the gate's clatter came to a halt. Dick took his foot off the brake.

He drove up the long, winding lane and parked in his usual spot near the side door. He killed the engine and unbuckled his seatbelt. Put his

hand on the door handle. And stopped, staring up at the manor.

From here, it looked the same as ever. The stone façade hadn't changed since Dick first saw it. (Hell, it probably hadn't changed since *Bruce* first saw it.) Above the door, the diamond-paned windows were glowing with warm yellow light. He'd seen that light hundreds of times, through pouring rain and blinding snow. On a summer night like tonight, it promised refuge to more than just him; though he couldn't tell from here, he knew the glass was pinging with moths. And gathered in the corners were the spiders, eager to take advantage.

Dick breathed out and reminded himself why he was here. Why he hadn't asked Bruce if they could cancel and try again in two weeks.

"It's the Drake boy," Alfred had said when he called Dick, Thursday before last. He'd just returned from the UK, and Bruce had dropped a bombshell on him: not only did he want to start fostering again, but the new kid was set to arrive on Saturday.

Dick had come to Gotham twice that week to give Batman back-up. *Twice.* And Bruce hadn't said a word.

Dick was biting his tongue so hard he could taste blood while he listened to Alfred explain how he'd had to offer the cleaners double their normal rate to get the manor in good enough shape for a visitor with such short notice.

"Why am I hearing this from you?" Dick had finally asked.

Alfred's sigh was long and deep, and Dick realized he already knew the answer.

"Never mind," he'd said, and he asked instead if there was anything he could do to help.

This dinner—"And an honest effort, please"—were all that Alfred asked.

To Bruce's credit, he'd called Dick the following day—probably because Alfred had given him shit—and filled him in on some of the gory details. Despite the rough patch that he and Bruce were going through at the moment, Dick's heart broke for the kid. The way Tim had lost his parents was so different from his own and, in a sense, crueller. Add in the fact that Dick remembered Timothy—*Tim,* he reminded himself sharply—from a handful of galas over the years, and he understood where Bruce was coming from.

Really, he did. And it gave him... hope, maybe? to know that Bruce hadn't brought Tim into the manor with the intention of finding a new Robin. Maybe that was why Bruce had waited until Alfred returned to share the news. He probably didn't think Dick would believe him if he'd just called out of the blue to say he was taking in a new kid. And he was right: Dick *wouldn't* have believed him. Not without Alfred backing him up.

So, here he was. Sleep-deprived and nursing several bruises, but prepared to make an honest effort. For Alfred... but also for Tim.

Because, seriously. It'd only been a week, and the kid had already tried to run away. Clearly, Bruce needed all the help he could get.

Dick looked at his reflection in the side mirror. For a moment, it was his mother's hand mirror, dust clinging to its rounded edges. For a moment, he was wearing bright colours instead of a grey linen shirt and black jeans. He had chalk on his hands. On the other side of the curtain, he could hear the ringmaster's booming voice and the hum of the crowd.

Dick smiled and stepped out into the warm yellow spotlight.

They'd been back from Metropolis for a little over an hour when a security alert on Bruce's phone told him that Dick's code had just been used to open the front gate.

He was glad. It had taken weeks of negotiation (with Alfred doing a lot of the heavy lifting) to set up these twice-monthly 'civilian' dinners —no Batman or Nightwing talk allowed—and they'd missed the last one, as Dick had been on the west coast. Sometimes, especially after a break, these meals were held in near-complete silence, but it was getting easier. Little by little.

Bruce dismissed the notification and set his phone back down on the couch without getting up. The last time he'd met Dick at the door, Dick had accused him of 'looming' while he took his shoes off. So Bruce stayed right where he was— with Tim on the couch while an old episode of *Mythbusters* played on the TV. Tim was nodding off, but trying to pretend that he wasn't.

Bruce couldn't blame him. Even though they'd both gone back to bed after returning from the park—Bruce tuned every motion detector to its highest sensitivity first, of course—their hellish morning was still obviously taking a toll. The train ride hadn't included nearly as much

conversation this time around, and Tim had tried to convince him that maybe it would be better if he had dinner upstairs alone instead of down here with Dick. He'd framed it like he wanted Bruce and Dick to hang out alone together, which was strange enough, but when Bruce asked him pointblank if he wanted to meet Dick, he hadn't been able to give a straight answer one way or the other. Bruce blamed fatigue, or stress, or some combination of the two, but it was a relief when Tim finally seemed to believe him when he said that he really did want Tim there, and so did Dick.

Several minutes after Dick used his code on the gate, the side door finally opened. At the other end of the couch, Tim started at the noise and hastily rubbed his face. In the midst of this, he turned his head, just a little, to check if Bruce had noticed. Bruce kept his eyes fixed on the television and watched Tim relax in his peripheral vision— for a few seconds, anyway.

Because as soon as Dick's voice filtered down the hall, Tim sat up straight and swallowed hard.

Bruce felt a pang of guilt. He'd put too much pressure on Tim, made him feel like he *had* to be here, and now—

On the other side of the wall, Dick laughed at something Alfred said. A smile flitted across Tim's face. Bruce breathed out a small sigh of relief.

Finally, there was the sound of footsteps, and Dick appeared in the doorway, an easy smile on his lips. "Hey, guys," he said, his eyes zipping past Bruce to focus on Tim. "Alfred says dinner's ready."

Tim got to his feet while Bruce turned off the TV. Dick came more fully into the room, gracefully edging away when Bruce reached out to squeeze his shoulder.

"You must be Tim," said Dick, and he introduced himself. He stuck out a hand, then pulled it back. "Actually, I feel like we should hug. Are you a hugger?"

The only answer was silence. Bruce glanced over to find Tim staring up at Dick with an expression that Bruce had never seen on his face before.

Dick's smile fell somewhat, but he soon hitched it right back up. "I'll... take that as a no?"

“No,” Tim said, too quickly and too loud. His cheeks went scarlet. “No, that’s not— um.” His eyes darted over to Bruce, then back to Dick. “It’s just, that’s exactly what you said the last time I met you.”

Dick’s eyebrows came down, obviously puzzled. “I’m sorry, I don’t remember,” he said. “Which gala was that?”

“Not a gala,” said Tim. His face was still pink, and he shrugged his shoulders. “My nanny took me to the circus when I was four. You, uh. You signed my program before the show.”

Dick’s smile was back and brighter than ever. He huffed a laugh. “No kidding,” he said. “Well, now I feel like we have to hug. If you— if that’s okay?”

Tim nodded, and the pieces fell into place. It wasn’t that Tim didn’t want to meet Dick; he was just nervous about meeting him. Watching him now, Bruce could finally identify the look on Tim’s face: he was *starstruck*.

It was kind of— no, it was completely adorable, especially considering how mature Tim acted almost all of the time. Like his appetite for baked treats, it reminded Bruce that he was still just a kid, only fourteen years old.

Almost fifteen, Bruce reminded himself. Which meant that he’d gone to the circus when— *oh no.*

“Any trouble with the car today?” Bruce asked Dick quickly, hoping to steer him towards a new subject before he also pieced together the timeline.

It didn’t work. Dick just shot him an incredulous look and said, “The car’s fine, Bruce.”

Then he wrapped an arm around Tim’s shoulder to lead him out of the room. “So, how was the show that night?” he asked, all smiles once more. “Did we bring our A-game, or did we just phone it in?”

Like Dick was physically capable of phoning anything in, Bruce thought, following them helplessly.

“I actually don’t remember that much,” Tim answered, and Bruce felt another wave of relief. “Other than meeting you, I mean.”

Dick hummed thoughtfully. “You know, you don’t have to lie to

protect my feelings," he said.

"What?" Tim stammered, a split-second before he tripped over his own feet.

But Dick still had his arm around the boy's shoulders and kept him from falling. He even managed to make it look natural. "You can tell me if we sucked," he went on like nothing had happened. "I promise I won't hold it against you."

"Oh," Tim chuckled. "No. You didn't suck. It was a great show."

Dick visibly preened. "Good answer," he said. "I was totally planning to hold it against you."

Bruce chuckled. Neither of the boys noticed.

Alfred must have told Dick about where they'd be eating tonight, because he passed by the dining room without comment. Four places were set at the kitchen table when they arrived, and Alfred was just pulling the roast out of the oven. There was the usual flurry of activity to get everything—and everyone—to the table, but with Tim and Dick pitching in, they managed in no time.

"So, do you still have that program?" Dick asked, once they were settled and their plates were filled. "I don't think I have any of those anymore. It'd be cool to see."

Tim nodded and swallowed hastily. "Yeah, I have it. I keep it in an inside pouch in my backpack." Dick gave him a curious look, and Tim added, "So I don't lose it. Things... sometimes go missing if you leave them at foster homes."

"Oh," said Dick, his expression clearing at once. "Yeah, Jason used to talk about that."

Did he? Bruce didn't remember that.

Dick and Tim kept talking, but Bruce wasn't listening. He was thinking about how this may have been the first time that Jason's name was said aloud in front of Tim. It was the first time that Jason's name was said out loud in the manor in a very long time, in fact, and it wasn't really surprising that it would be Dick who said it. Bruce often marvelled at the way that Dick could just... *say* things, sometimes.

And it frustrated him, too. Because lately they couldn't seem to say

anything to each other. Nothing of substance, anyway. Every time they tried, it turned into another version of the same argument they'd been having for months. As a result, Bruce stuck to lighter topics. And work, of course, but that was fraught, too. Any time they worked together for more than a night or two, it didn't end well. Sometimes they didn't even make it that long. It was a far cry from the dynamic duo of old, that was for sure. But, for now, all Bruce could do was give Dick the time and space he seemed to need, and try and keep the lines of communication open... even if sometimes he failed at that, sometimes rather spectacularly.

Tim was telling Dick about his photography hobby when Bruce tuned back into the conversation. "I used to do some film. Had a dark room at my parents' house, but now I stick to digital."

"What kind of camera are you using?" Dick asked.

Tim spoke hesitantly, like he wasn't sure Dick knew enough about cameras to understand. "I have a mirrorless Fujifilm camera, XT-series?"

Dick nodded, and Tim, reassured, went on. "It's a few years old, but it's a flagship model, so it's pretty good. And I like that it's smaller and lighter than a full frame camera, like a DSLR."

"That's fair," said Dick. "Would you be interested in new gear, or are you thinking, the smaller the better?"

Tim seemed to need to think about this for a second. After another bite of his mashed potatoes, he said, "I don't know. I like not having to carry around a big heavy thing when I go out to shoot, but on the other hand, it would be nice to have a camera with a bigger sensor... though I'd need the glass to match it, and that can get pricey."

Dick nodded. "Well, I might be able to help you out there," he said. "My friend, Donna, she's a professional photographer. She just upgraded and told me was thinking of selling off some of her old equipment. I'm pretty sure she said it was a Canon... something. R2? R6? I can't remember."

Tim had stopped eating. "A Canon EOS R6, Mark II?"

"Yeah, maybe," said Dick. "I think so, actually. That's pretty good, right?"

"That's— uh, yeah," said Tim, with a slight laugh. "Yeah, that's pretty

good."

"Well, I could ask her," Dick volunteered. "And her partner at the studio, she's a lens reseller, so I know they have a few that they're looking to get rid of. Donna said they have way more than they could ever use." Dick gave Tim another big smile. "Pretty sure you qualify for the friends and family discount."

Tim stared at him open-mouthed, then seemed to shake himself back to reality. "I— there's no way I could pay for all that, but maybe you could ask if she has anything in a lower price range?"

Now Dick was the one giving Tim a strange look. To Bruce's surprise, his eyes flicked over to meet his before he smiled at Tim again. "No, Tim, you misunderstand," he said kindly. "It'd be free. She'd be *giving* it to you. No money involved."

Tim's eyes were wide. For one second, Bruce thought he might accept Dick's offer with a simple *Yes, thank you,* but then he shook his head.

"She can't do that," he protested. "That camera is worth a fortune, even without any lenses."

"Probably," said Dick with a careless shrug. "But you're family, so who cares?"

Dick may as well have been speaking backwards, for all that Tim seemed to understand him. Bruce couldn't help but notice that the last time he'd seen Tim look this baffled was also the last time that Bruce had used that particular f-word. Bruce cleared his throat quietly, drawing the boys' attention before he could think too much about what that meant.

"Your birthday is in a few weeks," he said, ostensibly to Tim, but more so for Dick's benefit.

Dick, never one to drop a ball he'd been handed, grinned. "Perfect!" he said. "That's my shopping all done."

Tim's confused expression was slowly turning into a smile, and there was nothing fake or mask-like about it. Bruce felt something go warm in his chest and glanced over at Alfred, who'd clearly noticed as well and was nodding with approval.

"Just try and act surprised when you open it, okay?" Dick added to Tim.

Tim actually laughed. It was quick, and it was quiet, but it was real. “Okay,” he told Dick. “I will. Thank you.”

Buoyed by Tim’s reaction, Bruce spoke up again. “And if there’s anything else you have your eye on— something that Donna isn’t getting rid of, I mean,” he clarified, “I’d be happy to get it for you, Tim. Birthday or no.”

“Oh,” said Tim.

One syllable. Surprised. But Bruce already knew what was coming next.

“That’s okay,” Tim said. “You don’t need to do that. Camera sh— stuff is expensive.”

It’s not about the money, Bruce could have said, but he was pretty sure it wasn’t really about the money in Tim’s eyes, either. Money was just an easy excuse.

“He’s probably gonna buy it anyway,” Dick told Tim in a stage whisper. “Trust me, you’d be better off giving him a little direction. Unless you want the kind of camera that would make NASA jealous.”

Tim let out another small huff of laughter, not as genuine this time. His eyes darted to Bruce again, then back to Dick.

Bruce’s smile felt brittle. He knew Dick was just teasing, just doing what he did— using charm and humour to distract his way out of an awkward situation. In any other circumstance, Bruce would probably even appreciate it. But today, with the details from his mental case file on Tim still fresh in his mind—his nightmares, the exaggerated startle response, the way he’d taken off this morning, and his surprise that Bruce had cared enough to track him down—well. Today, Dick’s comment slipped under Bruce’s skin, poking at an old injury that he sometimes forgot he had. Because he’d heard the things that people said about Bruce Wayne behind his back. And not just at galas or in the gossip rags.

“That bastard thinks if he just throws enough money at a problem, eventually it’ll go away. What’s he ever actually done for this city, huh? For people like us?”

“He can donate as much as he wants, it doesn’t change the fact that we’re stuck waiting for a train that’s always late while he’s got a driver on standby.”

“A driver? He’s got a fucking jet!”

He’d heard it from neighbours chatting on street corners, commuters in subway stations, students walking home from the pub, parents in parks, seniors at rec centres, criminals in dark alleys, nurses, social workers, warehouse workers, fishermen, cab drivers, waitresses... the list went on and on. He’d sold his persona a little too well over the years; now, everyday Gothamites were convinced that all Bruce Wayne had to offer was money, and he wasn’t very good at it.

And here Dick was, saying the same damn thing. That the best he could do in this situation was to buy Tim stuff— and the wrong stuff at that.

While Dick and Tim carried on talking about cameras, Bruce stabbed moodily at a cooked carrot on his plate. The boys didn’t notice the slight scrape of his fork, but Alfred did. Without a word, he leaned into Bruce’s space and laid a hand on his forearm. When Bruce looked up in surprise, Alfred gave his arm a reassuring squeeze.

Bruce managed a smile, which Alfred returned. He kept his hand where it was a moment longer, then they both went back to their dinner in silence, leaving the boys to get to know each other.

After everyone had finished eating, Dick came back from the bathroom to find the kitchen empty except for Alfred, who was rinsing plates and stacking them near the dishwasher.

“Damn, Al,” he teased, crossing the room to join him. “Was it something you said?”

“Certainly not, Master Richard,” Alfred replied. The use of Dick’s full name played up his highly affronted tone. It was extremely... British, but Dick could see right through it and laughed.

“So where is everybody?” he asked, as he opened the dishwasher and pulled out the bottom rack.

“Master Bruce said he had some materials for Wayne Enterprises that he needed to review before Monday,” said Alfred.

Dick saw through that, too. It’d been impossible not to notice the way that Bruce had gotten quieter and quieter over the course of the meal, fading into the shadows of Dick and Tim’s conversation.

“So he’s upstairs brooding,” Dick translated. Alfred’s moustache twitched, but he carried on as if there was no interruption.

“And Master Tim likes to walk the grounds in the evenings,” he said.

Dick’s eyes went to the clock on the microwave, then to the nearly pitch-black landscape on the other side of the terrace doors. Given what time they’d had dinner, the sun had set over an hour ago. “Kinda late for that, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Alfred agreed, with a light sigh. “But he… values his independence.”

That sounded like a euphemism if ever Dick had heard one.

While they’d been talking, Dick’s hands had been moving automatically, loading the plates into the dishwasher. He noticed now that there were none left in his pile. Alfred was elbow-deep in the potato pot, so Dick took advantage of the brief pause in his duties to dry his hands and go to the table to gather their glasses and forgotten cutlery.

Also, with his back to Alfred, it was easier to ask what he’d been wondering since he’d called that morning. “Are you sure he doesn’t just want to get away from Bruce?”

Behind him, Alfred sighed again, but didn’t speak. Dick brought the glasses to the dishwasher, all four in one hand. They clinked as he placed them on the rack, one after another. Then he nudged the glass at one end of the line, watching how the glasses behind it fell into a neater, straighter line, with smaller gaps between them. But if he pushed too hard—

“Perhaps,” Alfred answered finally. “But I don’t believe it’s a reaction to anything Master Bruce is doing or saying. Based on his records, this is a pattern of behaviour on Master Tim’s part. By this point, one might even call it a habit.”

A metallic clatter drew Dick’s attention away from the row of glasses. Alfred had set the rinsed potato pot on the edge of the sink. Dick pushed the top rack back into the dishwasher and reached for the pot to load it into the bottom.

“So this morning, in Metropolis, they didn’t have a fight or anything,” he summarized.

“No,” Alfred said. No hesitation, no deception.

“Good,” said Dick, and he meant it.

“Well,” Alfred hedged. Dick’s eyes snapped up.

“Well what?” he demanded, too sharp by half. “Alfred, what happened?”

“There was no argument that I know of,” Alfred said, placating and patient. “I only meant that I question whether or not that is, in fact, *good.*”

Dick frowned. “I don’t understand.”

Alfred dried his hands and turned his attention to the leftover roast that was sitting on the stove. “Can you please fetch me the largest storage container from the cupboard above the fridge?” he requested instead of explaining.

Dick exhaled through his nose, but did as he was asked, stretching up to open the cupboard in question. He held the stack of smaller containers on one flat palm as he reached in with his other hand to retrieve the largest. Balancing everything was no problem, of course, as he half-leaned over to give Alfred the container. He even pulled one leg up behind him, graceful as a ballerina. Alfred was watching with amusement in his eyes, so Dick played it up a little, letting the dishes wobble dramatically before he steadied everything with a flourish and put it back.

“Thank you, my dear boy,” Alfred said, his smile breaking out fully. “I do so miss having you around.”

The words hurt, but it was like an old bruise now, just tender to the touch. Not as sharp as it used to be.

“Alfred, what happened with Tim in Metropolis?” Dick asked after a moment.

Alfred sighed, but gestured him over to help as he sliced up the rest of the roast and put it into the container Dick had retrieved. While they worked, Alfred told him the story— or as much of the story as Bruce had told him, Dick reminded himself. He explained how Tim had been startled by something and had spilled a cup of coffee. How he’d excused himself when Bruce asked if he could explain what had startled him. How he’d gone to his room for a while and then, while

Bruce was in the shower, he'd disappeared completely.

Dick shook his head as Alfred explained that Bruce had followed the kid around for nearly an hour, like some kind of stalker or PI, before finally confronting him in the park. "I hope you told him just how fucking creepy that is," he said.

"Language, Master Dick," Alfred admonished, and when Dick rolled his eyes, he said, "I know, you're an adult now, and you can say whatever you like when you're in your own space. And... downstairs, I suppose. If you must. But up here, in my kitchen, there are rules."

He pointed towards the counter, and there was the swear jar, right where it belonged. The label was faded and scuffed in the corners, but Dick could still see it brand new. He could see Alfred sitting across the table from him, could hear the snip of the scissors as he cut the paper to the right size, the squeak of the markers as he wrote on it. Dick could feel the confusion he felt that day when Alfred explained with unending patience that yes, he was also making something for Master Bruce while he was at the office, but no, it didn't need any glitter. Dick remembered thinking that his art project was gonna be *way* better than Alfred's (because it sparkled, *duh*), and how proud he was when Bruce stuck it to the fridge. He also remembered laughing when Alfred found blue glitter all over the manor for weeks afterwards.

"Right," Dick said, back in the present. He reached into his front pocket for his wallet. "Sorry, Alfred. Two bucks, yeah?"

"Gone up to three now," Alfred corrected him, his moustache twitching again.

"Ugh. Inflation," Dick complained, but he slid the money through the slot in the jar lid just the same.

Alfred let out a quiet laugh. He turned away for a few seconds, then turned back and handed Dick a stack of containers loaded with slices of roast beef, mashed potatoes, and glazed baby carrots. There was also a small dish on top that held nothing but gravy.

"For your lunches," Alfred said simply.

"How did you even—" Dick started, because the last time he'd looked, Alfred was putting the meat in the big container, not making up individual portions. But Alfred's eyes were twinkling, so Dick just smiled and gave him a one-armed hug.

“Thanks, Alfred,” he said sincerely.

They parted a moment later when, over Dick’s shoulder, the terrace door opened, letting in the sound of crickets and a fresh warm breeze.

“Ah,” said Alfred. “You’re just in time for dessert, Master Tim. If you’d like some, of course.”

“Oh,” said Tim, clearly surprised. His sharp eyes took in Dick and his armful of leftovers, then the mostly-clean kitchen behind him. “I didn’t realize we were— sorry,” he cut himself off.

“You didn’t realize we were sorry?” Dick repeated with a chuckle that he regretted a second later when Tim’s cheeks darkened and he turned back to the door to close it behind him.

“I could’ve helped,” Tim explained. “I’m sorry. You’re a guest, you shouldn’t have had to—”

“A guest?” said Dick. He laughed again, but a little more gently. “Tim, I haven’t been a guest here in a long damn time.”

Alfred loudly cleared his throat, which was exactly what Dick was hoping for. He made a show of setting the food down on the counter so he could take out his wallet to put another deposit in the jar.

“Guests curse for free,” he told Tim, long-suffering, and it was a relief when the kid laughed.

“Master Tim, would you mind going upstairs and asking Master Bruce if he’d be interested in dessert?” Alfred suggested, as he pulled a lemon meringue pie out of the fridge.

“I can go,” Dick volunteered, noticing Tim’s hesitation. Then he noticed the pointed look Alfred was giving him out of Tim’s view. “Or — walk with you, at least,” he amended. He picked up the leftovers again. “I’m going out to put these in the car anyway.”

He gestured towards the hall, and, after another pause, Tim went through the door. Dick spun back and mouthed a *Sorry!* to Alfred before he followed.

“Won’t those go bad?” Tim asked after they’d only taken a few steps. “It’s hot out.”

“Hm?” said Dick, then he caught on. “Oh. No, I brought a cooler with

an ice pack. Alfred always sends me home with way too much food. Parents, right?"

"Oh," said Tim, but it wasn't a normal *oh*. It was an *oh* like Dick had just told him an unusual and little-known fact, and he needed to think about it before he replied.

"Meet you back in the kitchen in a sec," said Dick as they reached the base of the back stairs.

Tim looked up the steps with mild trepidation, but he nodded firmly at Dick. "Okay."

Dick nodded back with a smile and carried on towards the door. Once he was on the other side of it, he glanced through the glass and caught sight of Tim's back as he climbed the stairs. He looked so small, but he carried himself like a grown-up, with his shoulders square and his head held high. He was the oldest almost-fifteen-year-old that Dick had ever met.

He wished he could remember meeting Tim before, but, for obvious reasons, everything about that time in this life—with a few notable exceptions—was a bit of a blur. Still, the spark in Tim's eyes reminded him of the best parts of performing. There was just something so honest about that excitement, that wonder. It had made Tim seem like an actual kid for a few minutes.

Dick hadn't missed the surprise in Bruce's face when he saw it, too. Dick got the feeling that Tim wasn't used to being—or maybe being allowed to be—a kid.

As he opened the trunk and pulled the cooler forward to open it as well, Dick decided that he should probably come around a little more often than once or twice a month. At least until the end of the summer. Because he remembered how hard it was to be Bruce Wayne's only child; he knew Tim wasn't going to get much more opportunity to be a kid if he was just hanging out with Bruce and Alfred all the time.

And... Dick should have been around more with Jason. He wasn't going to make that mistake again. He was trying to do better; Bruce was trying to do better; and Alfred had asked for an honest effort.

Dick figured he owed the kid he met at Haly's Circus at least that much.

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

In which Tim can't sleep.

He had to get up. He was spiralling, and it wasn't going to get better. If he was awake anyway, there were things he could do, contingency plans he could prepare.

It was well after midnight. Tim's bedroom was dark, a soft rain falling outside. After a week of living here, and a weekend spent sleeping somewhere else, the bed didn't feel too big or too soft anymore. It had actually started to feel familiar.

And yet, Tim lay awake, cataloguing the likely reasons that he couldn't get to sleep.

First, there was the obvious physical explanation: a late dinner, followed by dessert. His mother had always told him that sugar made him hyper and annoying. (Then, when he'd stopped eating it in her presence, she'd complained about how quiet he was.) It was possible that Alfred's lemon meringue pie was sweet enough that it was keeping him up. His stomach *was* churning, after all.

The second physical explanation was that he'd already slept enough during the day. He'd gone back to bed mid-morning in Metropolis, then he'd dozed a little on the train and again (embarrassingly) on the couch beside Bruce before dinner. It could be that his body had just decided that he didn't need any more sleep, and there wasn't anything he could do to change its mind.

Next, came the harder-to-define causes. His nannies used to tell him he was *over-tired* when he had trouble going to bed after a busy day. Tim didn't fully understand what that meant, but he *had* had a busy weekend. A busy and *good* weekend— a great weekend, in fact. From the train ride, where he and the literal Batman bounced around theories about Louis Le Prince, to the amazing aquarium and fascinating museum, to the surprise event that Bruce suggested at the library. (Which reminded him: he had to put a hold on a copy of that author's book the next time he went to the GCPL.) He'd even gotten to go out on his own and take pictures of a place he'd never been. *And* the weekend had ended with Tim getting to hang out with the incredibly cool, very very smart, unsurprisingly funny, and

unbelievably kind Dick Grayson, who had offered to get him a new camera for his birthday.

All in all, the weekend might have been perfect... if not for the six or so hours between the middle of the night on Saturday to the middle of the morning on Sunday, when he'd let his brain convince him to do something really, really dumb.

And *that,* he thought finally, was the most plausible explanation for why he couldn't sleep. The repercussions for those six troublesome hours were coming, and soon. He knew because of what Bruce had said to him in the kitchen before he went to bed.

Goodnight, Tim. I'll talk to you tomorrow.

That was how it always started.

(Nadine Parnell: *We'll discuss this in the morning, Tim.)*

(Peter Woytkevich: *It's late. Let's just talk about it tomorrow, okay?)*

(Janet Drake: *I'm not doing this now, Timothy. Go to bed, I'll deal with you tomorrow.)*

(And now, Bruce Wayne: *I'll talk to you tomorrow.)*

Bruce must have decided he was angry about what happened in Metropolis after all. He'd just been acting nice in the park, so Tim would go back to the manor while he made the arrangements with CPS. He'd probably talked to Dick and Alfred while Tim was sleeping, and told them to also be nice to Tim, since this would be his first and last *family dinner.* That was why Dick said that stuff about the camera. He knew he wouldn't have to follow through with any of it.

But Bruce couldn't fully hide his mood towards the end of the main course. By the time their plates were clear, and Dick excused himself to go to the bathroom, Bruce couldn't even stand to be in the same room with Tim anymore, and said he had to go upstairs.

Tim knew right then that he'd ruined everything. This was supposed to be Bruce's night to hang out with his son, and Tim had wrecked it.

He'd headed for the terrace door before he even registered that his feet were moving. He heard himself telling Alfred he wanted to go for a walk on the grounds, but he wasn't sure, now, if he'd asked for permission, or if he'd just left.

Again. Living up to Bruce's expectations, no doubt.

And after dinner, when he'd screwed up his courage enough to go upstairs like Alfred asked and tell Bruce about dessert, Bruce had seemed happier and more at ease. Like he'd made a decision, or found a solution to his problem. Tim wasn't sure what that solution was, until he said those five fateful words in the kitchen—

I'll talk to you tomorrow.

—and everything fell into place.

Tim should be happy about this. He'd made it. He was about to get away from Bruce Wayne— away from *Batman.* In a few days, or a week, Tim would be at a different foster home, back in the city proper, where he could continue sneaking out and taking pictures until the community legal services finally called him to say that his request for early emancipation had gone through, and he was on his own.

How many foster homes would he go through in that time? Fifteen? Twenty? How many foster parents were there in Gotham? Could Tim burn through them all before he was free? If he did, what then? Would the State have to send him somewhere else to try and find someone who wanted him?

Tim had to get up. He was spiralling, and it wasn't going to get better. If he was awake anyway, there were things he could do, contingency plans he could prepare.

He pushed himself out of bed and took the spare pillow with him. The pillow went to the floor in front of his bedroom door— softly, quietly. Then he doubled back and turned on his bedside lamp. He checked to make sure the pillow was completely covering the crack at the bottom of the door to block the light, then went to his computer.

He started by emailing his contact at the community legal services, asking for an update on his case. It would probably be a while before he got an answer, but he felt immediately better for asking. He checked a few more things online, like his blog notifications, and looked in on the ongoing saga of the Batman video that had gone viral last week. It seemed the news cycle had moved on, and fewer people were talking about it. Batman not being seen for an entire weekend probably had a part to play in that. If it weren't for Bruce making plans to go to Metropolis ahead of the video being captured, Tim would think that the trip was just an excuse to let the fervour die

down in Gotham before going back to his work. Instead, the trip was — well, Tim wasn't sure what it was. A business trip. And he'd invited Tim to come along because... Tim had no idea why. Ultimately, it didn't matter.

He switched profiles on his computer. Getting into his CPS file wasn't difficult—Tim had done it at least a dozen times by now—but he took his time, moving slowly and carefully to make sure he didn't trigger any failsafes. He might not be in Batman's house for much longer, but he still didn't want to do anything that would bring the GCPD snooping around the manor. He'd promised himself that he would never reveal Batman's secret identity, and that was a promise he intended to keep.

There was nothing new in his file. The document hadn't been updated since Tim's arrival at Wayne Manor. After some reflection, he supposed that was a relief, but there was more that he could investigate to find some answers.

He wasn't going to make the same mistake he'd made with the Parnells, which led to his being blindsided by his new foster parent. No, this time he was going straight to the source. He made his way onto the CPS email server and hacked into Lillian's inbox.

It didn't take long. Right at the top, there was an unopened message from Bruce Wayne, sent tonight just after dinner, with the subject line *RE: Update.*

Tim swallowed hard. *Okay,* he thought. *Better to know than not know.* At least once he knew he was right, he could sleep. (He hoped.)

He opened the message.

Hi Lillian,

Apologies for the delayed response, we got back from Metropolis a little later than intended. Thanks again for fast-tracking the approval to take Tim out of state. We had a great time!

Things are going well here. We're settling into a routine. You were right—Tim's an absolute delight. He's intelligent and thoughtful, just a great kid. He met Dick tonight, and the two of them really hit it off. We're still in the adjustment period, of course, so I'm sure we'll have some ups and downs, but I'm optimistic.

As for your question about the upcoming school year, I've spoken with the

administrators at Gotham Academy, and it sounds like they'd be happy to have Tim back, assuming he wants to return. The deadline for late enrolment is still a few weeks away, so he has some time to decide. And don't worry about the tuition— if Tim ends up living elsewhere, it will still be paid. Should he be unable to attend the Academy, and a portion of the tuition is refunded to me, I'll happily donate it to your organization, so another child can benefit from that money.

Let me know if you need something more specific to update Tim's file. Otherwise, I hope all is well on your end, and I'm sure we'll talk soon.

Best, Bruce

That... couldn't be right.

Tim read the email again, sure that he'd missed the part where Bruce told Lillian about how Tim went AWOL in Metropolis. Or how he'd disregarded Bruce's rules and gone further than ten blocks. Or how Bruce had had to track him down via a barista's description and his own memory of Tim's photos, for crying out loud.

But no. Bruce was... making plans? For the next school year? He— he'd spoken to Gotham Academy, and he was willing to pay Tim's tuition?

Tim hadn't been there since the year before last, when he'd finished out the semester commuting from his first foster home. Diane Rutherford had complained about having to drive Tim every morning, but she also got mad when he took matters into his own hands and woke up early to take the bus. He was out of the Rutherfords' home the day after his last exam, and spent the summer with the Parks, who enrolled him at Gotham Central High School, which was only a short walk from their house. Less than a month into the school year, Tim was back to taking the bus again, this time from the Woytkevichs' brownstone on 44th Street.

His grades had plummeted, despite being on the Honour Roll and skipping 5th grade at the Academy. He was just so *bored* at GCHS. He'd been dreading going back almost as soon as the final bell rang. He never thought he would have the opportunity to go to the Academy again after his disastrous freshman year at GCHS. How had Bruce—?

Right. Money.

Okay, so that answered how. But *why?* Why was Bruce willing to

invest in a kid whose track record with foster families was worse than the Knights in the playoffs?

I'm optimistic, he'd said. That was... not a word that Tim associated with Batman.

For one moment, Tim let himself believe what Bruce said to him in the park. *I found you because you needed finding. I was concerned.* Tim let himself remember Bruce's arms around him, the smooth, expensive feel of Bruce's shirt under his hands.

And, before that— how he'd examined Tim's hand in the kitchen to make sure it hadn't been burned by the coffee. The gentle touch of the towel as he patted it dry. *It's my job to worry about you.*

But no. That didn't make sense. It was Bruce's—Batman's—job to worry about other things. Bigger things. Like citizens caught the crossfire of a gang turf war. Or thieves plotting to hit the banks. Or a murderer on the loose. Or— or how about the Joker? It was *not* his job to worry about Tim. So why was he telling Lillian what she needed to hear to make sure Tim would stay?

Tim thought for a long moment, but it was late, and his brain was slowing down, and he couldn't come up with an answer. Whatever Bruce's reasons, Tim at least knew he wasn't about to be kicked out of Wayne Manor. He didn't have any idea *why,* but whatever Bruce was going to talk to him about tomorrow, it wasn't—

Oh, Tim thought, because a new (and extremely obvious) possibility had just occurred to him. When Bruce had said he'd talk to him tomorrow, Tim had heard Bruce's *words,* but he missed the *language.*

There was no steely glint in Bruce's eye, like his mother.

No exhausted slump of his shoulders, like Peter.

No crossed arms, like Nadine.

Bruce hadn't been foreshadowing some difficult conversation on the horizon. He'd been *saying goodnight.*

Tim laughed, probably too loud for the middle of the night when he was supposed to be asleep, but he couldn't help it. With the relief, the late hour, and the fatigue that had been with him since he woke up from a nightmare in Metropolis, the laughter bubbled up and out of him like a fountain, and he pressed his hand to his mouth because,

seriously, *Batman* was just a few doors down, and everyone knew he could hear everything within a mile radius, and Tim had hacked into his frickin' email, which was still up on his computer for anybody to see the second they walked in the door.

Stifling his giggles as best he could, he exited the CPS server, careful as ever, and shut his computer down. Then he walked away from the desk and paced in a circle to get the leftover energy out of his system before going to bed and finally, actually falling asleep.

When Tim opened his eyes, he could tell it was late, even though his curtains were still closed. It just *felt* late, the way that summer vacation days did sometimes. Also, he was starving. And he really had to pee.

He didn't bother to pick up the pillow that was still on the floor. He just nudged it out of the way with his foot and crossed the hall to use the bathroom. When he returned, he noticed the time displayed on his alarm clock and winced. It was almost afternoon.

He went to the dresser at once to find something to wear, hurrying so he could get downstairs and see what there was for breakfast. He wondered if there was any cereal in the cupboard. He hoped there was coffee. He'd put on his jeans and was tugging a blue t-shirt over his head when someone knocked on his bedroom door. The sound made him jump, his heart racing in his chest.

He'd forgotten, he realized. He'd forgotten that he wasn't alone in the house.

He took a second to calm himself, fishing a pair of balled-up socks out of his top drawer, then called, "Come in."

He was expecting Bruce, but it was Alfred who pushed the door open. And he was carrying—

"Is that coffee?" Tim blurted out.

"Indeed it is," said Alfred dryly. "I am here as well."

"Sorry," said Tim in a rush, his face going warm. "Good morning, Alfred."

"We're cutting it a little close today, but good morning, Master Tim," said Alfred, amused. "May I come in?"

“Oh. Yeah, sure.” Tim picked up the pillow so Alfred could step inside without tripping over it.

Alfred noticed, raising an eyebrow at the pillow. “I trust you slept well?” he asked, as he set the coffee tray down on Tim’s computer desk.

“Yeah, mostly,” Tim lied. He tossed the pillow back on the bed where it belonged and shrugged. “Must’ve thrown that in my sleep or something.”

“Hm,” said Alfred, neutral. Tim chanced a glance up, but Alfred was focused on pouring coffee from the silver carafe into an elegant white mug. “Master Bruce has told me of your fondness for coffee,” he said, but he hesitated before handing it over. “Are you sure I can’t convince you to put some milk in it?”

“No,” said Tim, then frowned. “I mean, yes, I’m sure. No milk.”

Alfred sighed and handed him the mug. “Very well. One cup only, then.”

Tim raised the coffee to his lips. It smelled so good it made his mouth water, but then he stopped himself. “Wait,” he said. “Were you—?”

“Was I what?” asked Alfred, with a little too much innocence.

Tim took a chance, trusting his intuition. “You said that like there was a chance I could have more than one cup.”

Alfred’s eyes sparkled. “Well,” he began, “Master Bruce is concerned about a boy of your age taking in too much caffeine. I share his concerns, of course, but the high acidity of black coffee also worries me. There is nothing I can do about that, however, except to advise that you drink less, or recommend that you add milk or cream.”

“Okay,” Tim said slowly.

“But I *can* prepare coffee with only half the usual amount of caffeine,” Alfred went on. “In this way, two cups of coffee would be permissible according to Master Bruce’s guidelines. But, without milk or cream to lower the acidity, one will have to suffice in order to meet my own standards for the sake of your stomach.”

Tim looked down at the cup in his hands, then over at the carafe on the tray. “This is half-decaf?” he said, making sure he understood.

“It is.”

“So you’re saying I could have two with milk or one without?”

“Correct.”

“But half-caf regardless?” said Tim, because he’d just taken a sip and it tasted no different from any other coffee he’d had.

Alfred’s moustache twitched again. “Theoretically, on days when you chose one cup without milk, it wouldn’t be half-decaf.”

“Theoretically,” Tim repeated, catching on. “And I don’t suppose you’d let me make the coffee myself?”

“Oh, good heavens, no,” Alfred exclaimed dramatically, which made Tim smile. “Were I to do that, I would be remiss in my duties, dear boy.”

“Right,” said Tim, chuckling. Because he may have been played, but he could respect a good game. “Okay. Then I’ll take some milk, please, Alfred.”

“Excellent choice, Master Tim.” Alfred poured milk into his cup and offered Tim a small spoon to stir with. When he was done, he handed it back, but set the coffee down on his nightstand to finish putting on his socks.

“Now,” said Alfred, gathering up the tray. “Master Bruce is at Wayne Enterprises all day, unfortunately, so I’m afraid you’re stuck with me. Is there anything in particular you’d like to do today, or anywhere you’d like to go? I’m happy to drive you into the city if you wish.”

“Oh. Uh,” said Tim, surprised again. “Maybe I could go to the library? But you don’t have to drive me. I can take the bus.”

“Nonsense,” said Alfred, but he was cut off from saying more by the loud rumble of Tim’s stomach. “How about some breakfast— or, brunch, I suppose, before anything else?”

Tim nodded and gestured for Alfred to lead the way out of the room, then picked up his coffee and followed. “Thank you for bringing this up,” he said to Alfred’s back. “You really didn’t have to.”

“It was no trouble,” Alfred replied, as they descended the stairs. “I was on my way to wake you when I heard you up and about. The coffee

was already made. And besides, other than last night, I haven't seen you since you left on Thursday. I daresay I missed you, lad."

Tim huffed a laugh. "I find that hard to believe."

Alfred reached the bottom of the stairs first and turned around. "What makes you say that?"

"Come on," Tim said, because Alfred couldn't be serious. "A whole weekend to yourself, with no kid to clean up after? Isn't that a dream come true?"

"Should it be?" said Alfred.

He seemed to be genuinely asking, and Tim got that familiar sinking feeling in his stomach— the one that came when kids in his class said their parents had taken time off work to stay home with them when they were sick, or that they'd crawled into their parents' bed in the middle of the night after a bad dream. It was like Tim was on stage in the middle of a play, surrounded by people who knew all their lines, and Tim had never even seen a script.

He laughed again, too late. "I just thought, you work so hard around here. It'd be nice for you to have some time off."

"Ah," said Alfred. He carried on walking, but Tim cursed silently. He knew he'd accidentally revealed something he shouldn't have, and he doubted that this would the end of the conversation.

They reached the kitchen, and Tim set his coffee down before opening the pantry. "Do we have any cereal?" he asked.

"We do," Alfred answered, "but wouldn't you rather something a little more substantial?"

Tim *would,* actually, but—

"I cooked some bacon this morning," Alfred went on. "It's in the fridge if you'd like a sandwich instead."

That sounded really good. Way better than cereal. Still, Tim hesitated. "You aren't saving it for anything?"

"Just you, Master Tim," said Alfred.

He smiled when Tim nodded and went to the fridge instead of the pantry.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

> Tim identifies the men he photographed in Metropolis, but has no idea what to do next.
>
> *It was fine, he told himself. Batman would be* fine. *He'd caught plenty of bad guys without Tim's help. Compared to the Joker, this guy was nothing. Piece of cake... right?*

Chapter Notes

> Just a short one this week. It really needed to stand on its own— something something quality vs. quantity. Hope you enjoy, and next week's will be longer.

Now that it was clear that Tim wasn't on the verge of being kicked out of the manor, he had more mental energy to focus on other things— namely, the mystery men he'd photographed in Metropolis.

It didn't matter, ultimately, who they were or what they were doing. Chances were, Tim had witnessed a low-level drug deal or something just as ordinary. But Tim was curious, and he didn't have anything else to do at the moment. The Spanish conversation group that Bruce had suggested to help him improve his grade in that class started tomorrow, and swimming lessons didn't start until the first week of July.

(Yes, he was taking swimming lessons. Bruce had brought him a catalogue of summer programs offered by the city and told Tim to *choose something fun.* After an hour of panicking alone in his room with the catalogue, he'd assigned a numerical value to each class offered for his age group and used a random number generator to pick one. It had actually landed on Advanced Aquatics, but Tim knew from experience that he was about as buoyant as a cinder block, so he'd levelled that down to Beginner Swim— 8 weeks, Mondays and Thursdays. Bruce, at least, seemed happy about this.)

It only took him about two hours to identify the well-dressed man he'd seen in Metropolis, and honestly that was a little embarrassing, given how obvious it should have been. When Tim zoomed in on the very first picture he'd taken of the man, he saw that the tie clip the man had been wearing was actually a tiny LexCorp logo.

What had taken Tim so long was trying to get into LexCorp's HR servers. He'd never seen a system like that— it rivalled Batman's in terms of its layers of security. Realizing he was beaten, Tim had backed away, slowly and cautiously, and spent the next several minutes combing his systems to make sure he hadn't picked up any trackers.

Once he knew he was safe, he took the easier route of searching through LexCorp's *Meet Our Team!* page online. Corporate headshots never looked the same as candid shots, though, so he made a list of a few possible candidates, then searched social media. His guy was number five on the list: Dr. Sebastian Cronin, interim head of biotechnology at LexCorp's Metropolis labs.

The man who'd been with Cronin in the park was another story. Tim scoured all the photos he'd taken, but the man wasn't wearing something easily identifiable like Cronin was. All his clothes, as far as Tim could tell, were cheap and off-the-rack. He could have bought them anywhere. Worst of all, they covered him practically head to toe. If the man had any unique tattoos, scars, or birthmarks, Tim couldn't see them. His face wouldn't have stood out in a crowd, either: mid-fifties, salt-and-pepper hair, brown eyes, and a freshly shaven chin. Tim had a feeling that he usually wore a beard, but that was just a hunch. Not enough to go on.

If he could get remote access to the computers at the GCPD, he could probably get his hands on some kind of facial recognition software. But that was way too risky. The last time he'd managed remote control, he'd gotten out by the skin of his teeth. So, he was limited to poking through mugshots and most wanted lists, but that was a needle in a haystack. And it was *boring.* He could only do it for so long before his eyes glazed over, and he wouldn't be able to identify his own parents if he saw them.

He caught a lucky—or maybe *unlucky*—break on Wednesday morning. He was eating breakfast in the kitchen, scrolling through the news on his phone, and there, out of nowhere, was the man's face. Tim's spoon fell into his cereal bowl with a clatter that he barely heard as he took in the headline and subtitle of the article.

Murder Suspect Still At Large: DOC investigating possible corruption at Blackgate Prison after escape went unreported for five days.

"Oh shit," he said under his breath, grateful that he was alone in the manor at the moment. Bruce was at the office again, and Alfred had

left a note saying he'd gone to town to run some errands.

Tim quickly read the article, his eyes jumping from one important phrase to another. *Suspected of involvement in organized crime. Acquitted on assault charges four times. Apprehended by Batman earlier this month. Awaiting trial for two counts of first-degree murder.*

"Oh *shit,"* Tim said again. This dude was, like, a *bad guy* bad guy. And he was just... hanging out in broad daylight, at a public park in Metropolis, on a Sunday morning?

Tim scrolled back up to the man's picture, uncertain now that it was the same person he'd seen. After squinting at the mugshot for a moment, he abandoned his cereal to go back upstairs and grab his camera.

Five minutes later, he was staring into the faintly pink milk in his bottom of his bowl. It was the same guy. Tim had photographed a wanted criminal on the run from the law, completely by accident, just because something about the scene seemed off.

Good instincts, Tim thought faintly. But what the hell was he going to do now?

Batman needed to know. Or Commissioner Gordon. *Somebody* needed to know that this man, this Gabriel Lavaste, had been in Metropolis three days ago, and that someone from LexCorp had given him money. *For what,* Tim wondered. Was Dr. Fancy-Pants helping him get out of the country? Or maybe the scientist owed the criminal something? If Lavaste had ties to the mob, then maybe it was some kind of blackmail? Or a protection racket? Tim couldn't even begin to guess.

But he knew he couldn't send this picture to Batman. Or Gordon, because Gordon would show it to Batman. And the second Bruce saw it, he would know exactly where it had come from and who had taken it. Hell, he'd found Tim on Sunday because he recognized the park from Tim's other pictures. To hand these photos to Batman now would be like sending a text that just said, *Yup, it's me.*

Maybe Bruce already knew about Lavaste's whereabouts, Tim thought. Bruce had been in the park that day as well. Maybe he'd seen Lavaste, too. Surely he'd have recognized the dude. Batman had dragged his ass to Blackgate in the first place. Maybe— *oh!* That was probably what Batman was doing Saturday night, and why he hadn't slept. He was tracking the guy or something.

Yes, that was probably it, Tim decided, forcing himself to calm down somewhat. Batman no doubt had this handled. It was what he did. Just another day in the life of Gotham's resident vigilante. Compared to the Joker, this Lavaste guy was nothing. Piece of cake... right?

Tim spooned the last bits of mushy cereal into his mouth and swallowed mechanically until the bowl was empty. It was fine, he told himself again. Batman would be *fine.* He'd caught plenty of bad guys without Tim's help, he didn't need—

But what if he did? a small voice in the back of his mind whispered. Against his better judgment, Tim started listening to it.

What if Bruce *didn't* see Lavaste? What if he didn't know where the man had gone, or where to even start looking for him? Lavaste could be on a killing spree in Metropolis right this very minute, and Batman could have no idea. How many more people would die before he found out? And how much longer would it take him to catch Lavaste because Tim was sitting on a lead? Anyone Lavaste hurt now, any crimes he was committing, that was on Tim's shoulders. It was Tim's fault because he didn't come forward, because he was afraid of getting in trouble. Which was ridiculous. And cowardly, and— and *stupid*, and Batman—*Bruce*—would never look at him the same once he found out, would *never* forgive him, so—

"Hey, Tim," said a cheery voice from the kitchen door, and Tim jumped so bad he nearly knocked over his bowl.

"Oh, sorry," Dick said, stepping more fully into the room. "Figured you heard me coming down the stairs."

"No, I was... never mind," Tim panted, trying to make it sound like a laugh. He picked up his bowl and took it to the sink to cover the way his hands were shaking. "I just didn't think anybody else was here."

"Wasn't planning on it," Dick admitted. "I went out with a friend in Gotham last night, and it got kinda late, so I crashed here instead of driving home. Ooh, marshmallows," he added, picking up the box of cereal.

He smiled at Tim as he went to get himself a bowl and a spoon. Tim smiled back, not letting on in the slightest that he knew Dick was lying.

He wished he'd been able to get out there to see Nightwing in action last night. As Tim started to wash his dishes, he wondered what had

brought Dick to town, what case Batman needed his help with.

Wait, that's it, Tim thought suddenly. He had to tell *someone* about Lavaste, but it couldn't be Batman, and it couldn't be Gordon. Nightwing was the next logical option... but Tim would have to be careful. He'd have to be *very* careful.

He had to assume that, if Bruce suspected him of being the blogger/snitch, then he'd probably shared those suspicions with Dick. They were partners, after all, even if Dick wasn't Robin anymore and spent most of his time in Blüdhaven these days. So Tim would have to tell Dick enough that he caught on about Lavaste, but nothing more. He'd have to make the picture seem like an accident, so Dick wouldn't know that he'd taken it on purpose, or suspect that he'd done it more than once. And he'd have to tell Dick about it in such a way that made it unlikely that he would rat Tim out to Bruce. And the only way to do *that*...

Tim was going to have to play the younger brother card.

Not that he had any first-hand experience with this, of course. But, if TV had taught him anything, it was that siblings could trust each other not to tell their parents about something that would get them in trouble. Or— well, sometimes they could. Maybe that didn't apply when said parent was Batman. Tim didn't know. The only way to find out was to try it.

He didn't want to. He didn't want to lie to Dick. Not when they were still just barely getting to know each other. And not for something like this. But if it worked, then a suspected murderer would be back behind bars. Wasn't that worth it?

Tim took his time drying his bowl, mug, and spoon, and put them away before sitting down opposite Dick at the table. His phone and camera were right where he'd left them, but thankfully their screens had gone dark, hiding what he'd been looking at before Dick arrived. Tim took a deep breath—he didn't have to fake it much, he really did need the courage—before he spoke.

"Hey, Dick?" he said cautiously. "If I tell you something... can you promise you won't tell Bruce?"

Surprised, Dick looked up from reading the back of the cereal box. He opened his mouth to reply, but Tim cut him off.

"It's nothing bad," he added quickly, like he'd only just realized what

Dick could be thinking. “I swear I’m not, like, taking drugs or anything. It’s just...”

He sighed, and Dick set down his spoon. “Hey,” he said softly. “It’s okay, Tim. You can tell me.”

Tim gave him a swift smile that hurt, but only because he wished it was more real. “Okay. So, I took this picture when I was in Metropolis, and... it’s probably easier just to show you.”

He reached for his camera and turned on the display. The photo he’d been looking at a moment ago was still there. With his heart in his throat, knowing full well what else was on this camera’s SD card, Tim handed it to Dick.

“The thing is, I wasn’t supposed to be there,” he went on, while Dick frowned down at the screen. “Bruce told me to stay within ten blocks of the penthouse, and I didn’t, so if he found out, he’d get me in trouble, but I got this picture, and now I don’t know what to do.”

Dick set the camera down without scrolling through any of the other photos. “I won’t tell him,” he said. “But... I don’t understand. Why’s it matter? What’s so important about this picture?”

“Oh, right,” said Tim. He picked up his phone and unlocked it to show Dick the news headline, complete with Gabriel Lavaste’s mugshot. He handed it over, waited a beat, then blurted out, “Do you think that’s the same guy?”

Something sharpened in Dick’s face when he saw the image. He picked up the camera again and glanced between the two pictures. Tim kept talking, letting his nervous excitement come out as just nervousness.

“Because if it is him, then that’s— it’s really freaking me out to think about that,” he admitted. “And I should, like, go to the cops or something, right? But that means I’d have to tell Bruce, and I wasn’t even supposed to be at this park, and then he’ll be mad and—”

“Tim,” Dick interrupted, looking up. The sharpness was gone, and he was just Dick again. “Hey, take a breath. It’s gonna be all right. Okay?”

Tim nodded quickly. He’d been playing up the panic a little, but only a little. Everything in his body was thrumming, his heart fluttering in the centre of his chest. Still, he couldn’t help but believe it when Dick

told him something like that.

Dick set Tim's phone down. "I don't think it's the same guy," he said simply.

"You don't?" Tim said, with genuine surprise.

"No," said Dick. He glanced at the mugshot, then the camera again. "I mean, I can see why you might think that. His nose, maybe even his chin a little. But no. This isn't him."

Tim frowned down at the news headline on his phone. He couldn't tell if Dick was lying or not. He'd thought the resemblance was undeniable, but maybe Tim was wrong. Dick had been doing this a lot longer, so he probably would know better.

"Oh," he said, then sent Dick a grateful smile. "Well, that's a relief."

"Yeah, I bet," said Dick with a slight laugh. He handed Tim back his camera. "You got pretty close to him. Did he see you take this picture?"

There was some subtle change in Dick's tone when he asked that question, but Tim couldn't identify what it was. "No," he answered, shaking his head. "I don't think so, anyway. And I wasn't that close to him. I kinda took it by accident."

Dick sent him a puzzled look. With the camera turned so Dick couldn't see the display, Tim scrolled back past the other photos he'd taken of the shady men in the park.

"See, I was taking pictures of this lady's dog—"

"Aww!" Dick exclaimed, when Tim showed him. "He's so tiny! And he has a bandana!"

"I know, right?" Tim laughed. "But, yeah, so I'd zoomed in and leaned back to get a better shot, and I kinda hit the button without really meaning to, so I got the guys in the background."

"Oh, I see," said Dick with a nod. Tim hoped that meant he was believing him.

"Yeah. I was going through my pictures today, I was gonna delete it, then I saw this guy on the news, and—" Tim blew out a breath. "Kinda scared me, thinking this was him."

“Totally understandable. He’s a scary guy,” Dick said, picking up his spoon to go back to his cereal. After a few bites, he smiled at Tim conspiratorially. “So, level with me. Just how far outside the bounds were you?”

The question was casual, but there was that *something* in his voice again, and this time Tim could identify it. It was a minute shift from having a conversation to gathering intelligence.

Oh, Dick was *good* at this.

Tim looked down, hoping to hide his smile—or at least make it seem more sheepish than anything—as he told Dick the name of the park. “It’s, like, twenty blocks from the penthouse,” he added.

“Twenty?” Dick repeated with a laugh. “Oh, damn. No wonder you don’t want me to tell on you.”

“Yeah…” Tim said slowly. “You won’t, right?”

“Don’t worry,” Dick told him, still smiling. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

“Thank you,” Tim replied, but what he really wanted to say was, *Yours too, Nightwing.*

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

> Batman finds Lavaste. Nightwing finds Batman. Bruce finds his demons.
>
> *"Before you ask," said Nightwing, "I can't tell you where this information came from."*
>
> *Batman pursed his lips. "You can't, or you won't?"*
>
> *"I'm not answering that question," Nightwing said firmly.*

Wednesday was quickly becoming Thursday, and Batman was still perched on the roof of an apartment building across the street from Gabriel Lavaste's safehouse.

It had taken him the better part of the last two days to find this place, as it was registered under Lavaste's dead aunt's name, and the rent was paid by a subsidiary of a Falcone subsidiary. Earlier today, during daylight hours, Batman had put on a disguise and toured one of the available apartments in the building as a potential renter. He'd hung out in the neighbourhood all day, noticing patterns, talking to people. He learned that Lavaste's apartment was empty most of the time, and when it was occupied, it was often different people, coming and going at all hours. The more optimistic neighbours assumed someone was renting it out like a vacation home to make some money under the table; the pessimistic ones figured it was something shadier. But neither saw any point in reporting it, so, in typical Gothamite fashion, they left it alone and didn't ask a lot of questions.

Now, all Batman had to do was wait until Lavaste arrived. Gordon's snitches had said he would be back in town tonight, and Gordon's snitches were as reliable as Batman's own. It was just a matter of time.

Batman hoped he would show soon. If the man wasn't such a threat to public safety, he could have planted audio devices and monitored them from the Cave to find out what he was up to, but the sooner Lavaste was off the streets, the better. And now that the story of his escape was all over the media, the public knew to be looking out for him. The walls were closing in. Gordon had agreed to give Batman one night, but that was the best he could do. If Batman wanted to question Lavaste about his connections to LexCorp, he had to do it

tonight.

Which was extremely annoying, because Bruce really wanted to get home.

He'd been staying in since he and Tim returned from Metropolis, just in case Tim had another nightmare. On Sunday night, Bruce had broken the rules of civilian dinner when he walked Dick out to his car and asked if he'd be willing to step up and work in Gotham a bit more over the next little while. He didn't say anything about Tim's nightmares—those were nobody's business but his own—but he told Dick that he felt he should be home at night more, in case Tim needed him.

Dick had looked conflicted at the request—Bruce assumed it was because he was needed in Blüdhaven—but he agreed. He even told Bruce, somewhat begrudgingly, that he thought it was a good idea. So last night, when the Bat-Signal went off around 1, he'd called Dick and suited up just long enough to meet Gordon on the roof to get the details about the weapons shipment that Penguin's men were bringing in. Nightwing met him at the Tricorner Docks, and, after some surveillance to verify that it was a one-vigilante job, Batman had left it in Nightwing's capable hands and gone back to the manor.

Theoretically, he could have done the same tonight, but Dick didn't know all the details about the Justice League's investigation into LexCorp's dead scientist problem, and Batman didn't like to bring others into League missions without team approval. So Alfred was upstairs with a portable comm, keeping an ear out for both Tim and Batman, and Batman was here, hoping that Lavaste would show the hell up already.

After another hour of watching the empty, silent apartment, his vigil was interrupted by an unexpected but familiar sound from behind him.

"Nightwing," he said, not taking his eyes off the safehouse.

"Anybody ever tell you how annoying that is?" Nightwing asked.

"Make less noise next time," Batman advised. "I know you know how."

"I was trying to be polite, B," said Nightwing.

To Batman's surprise, his voice had that irritated strain that usually

only appeared after they'd been in each other's company for more than a few days. He glanced up to find Nightwing's mouth twisted into a scowl, his arms crossed over his chest.

"I went to the Cave," Nightwing went on. "Didn't think you would be out here, after what you told me the other day. And after last night."

"League business," Batman explained, turning back to the safehouse.

Nightwing blew out a breath. "Then why isn't the League here handling it?"

"This is Gotham," Batman snapped, annoyed that Nightwing would even ask. He knew how Batman felt about other heroes coming into his city. He even agreed— or, Batman thought he did.

"You..." said Nightwing. In Batman's peripheral vision, he was shaking his head. "You are something else, you know that?"

"What are you doing here?" Batman asked, because this was getting them nowhere.

With an exasperated huff, Nightwing folded his long legs and sat down beside Batman on the roof. "I got a tip earlier today, and it was bugging me, so I thought I'd better fill you in."

Batman turned his head to look at him, surprised again. "You came all the way back to Gotham to give me a tip?"

Nightwing's scowl deepened. "So now you *don't* want me around. I guess if you're out here after all, then—"

"That's not what I meant," Batman interrupted quickly, his eyes sliding back to the apartment. "I just meant, it must be something really important if you felt you needed to tell me in person."

Nightwing's shoulders lost some of their tension. "It might be," he said. "I'm not sure. And, before you ask, I can't tell you where this information came from."

Batman pursed his lips. "You can't, or you won't?"

"I'm not answering that question," Nightwing said firmly. Batman gritted his teeth and let out a long breath through his nose.

"All right," he said. "What have you got?"

Nightwing was silent for a beat, like he'd been prepared for more of a fight. "You know that Gabriel Lavaste guy? The one who broke out of Blackgate?"

Batman turned sharply. "Yes?"

"He was in Metropolis a few days ago. I wasn't able to confirm how he got there, or whether or not he's coming back to Gotham any time soon, but— what?" he interrupted himself, because Batman had scoffed without really meaning to.

"Your intel's a little out of date," Batman told him. He gestured to the apartment across the street. "This is Lavaste's safehouse. He's supposed to be arriving back in town tonight."

"Oh," said Nightwing. "Figures."

Batman waited, because he could tell Nightwing wasn't done. Sure enough—

"You told me you were stepping back," Nightwing accused him. "I even believed you. I thought maybe, I don't know, you'd learned a thing or two. I was willing to give you the benefit of the doubt, but here you are again. You just can't help yourself, can you?"

The words were darts, and Nightwing had always had good aim. "I *am* stepping back," Batman said, forcing his voice to stay level. "These are... unusual circumstances."

"They always are, aren't they?"

Batman stared at the apartment for a long moment, unsure what he could say. When he eventually turned around again, he found nothing but empty space beside him. Nightwing had taken his advice and left the rooftop a lot more silently than he'd arrived.

"Dammit," Bruce said under his breath.

When Lavaste did show up, he didn't give Batman a fight.

"Ah, shit," Lavaste said when he stepped into the living room, a beer in his hand, to find Batman silhouetted against the glass balcony door.

They stared at each other for a moment, then Lavaste lifted the can slightly. Batman tensed, but he didn't throw it.

“Can I at least finish this before you drag me off to Blackgate?” he asked. Batman didn’t answer.

Lavaste seemed to interpret Batman’s silence as permission and took a swig. Batman watched him closely for any sign of deception, but there was none. After a few seconds, Lavaste sat down on the white leather sofa and raised his feet to rest them on the mahogany coffee table. His gun remained exactly where it was, in the holster under his arm.

“Well, come on in, then,” said Lavaste. “Make yourself at fucking home.”

Batman took a silent step forward. Lavaste drank more beer, then sighed.

“You’re punctual, I’ll give you that,” he said. “I thought I might have more than one night in GC, but oh well. I did what I needed to do. You can take me back now. Or— once I finish my beer, I hope.”

“You did what you needed to do,” Batman repeated. His voice was barely above a whisper, but it carried. He moved closer to the couch. “What kind of deal did you broker with LexCorp?”

“LexCorp?” said Lavaste, watching warily as Batman approached. “I didn’t make a deal with LexCorp.”

“Don’t lie to me,” Batman said. He pushed the coffee table aside with his boot. Lavaste’s feet fell, and he scrambled to sit up straighter on the couch. His beer splashed over his jeans as the can was jostled.

“Sebastian Cronin,” Batman pressed on. “How do you know him?”

“I— I don’t,” Lavaste stammered. “Never heard of the guy. I swear.”

Batman reached out in a sharp, swift movement. Lavaste flinched, but Batman’s target was his weapon. He disassembled the pistol in seconds and tossed its parts to the other side of the room. Lavaste shrank into the sofa, his calm bravado having disappeared completely.

“You wanna try that again?” Batman growled.

Lavaste audibly gulped. “Look, I— I’d love to help you out, but you got the wrong guy. I don’t know anybody named, uh, what was the name again?”

“Cronin,” Batman reminded him. “Dr. Sebastian Cronin. You met him

in a park on Sunday. In Metropolis."

Lavaste's eyes widened. "How did you—?"

"I have my sources," Batman ground out. He grabbed Lavaste by his shirt collar and yanked him up, spilling more of his beer. "Now *talk."*

"Okay, okay," said Lavaste quickly. "I did meet a guy in Metropolis on Sunday, but I swear I didn't know who he was!"

"If you don't know him, why did you meet him?"

"It was a favour," Lavaste explained in a rush. "For the boss. He helped me get to Metropolis, so I had to help him get some money from a weasel. That's it."

"Money for what?"

"I don't know," said Lavaste. He flinched again when Batman tightened his grip. "I really don't! Don Falcone didn't tell me anything. He just said meet this guy, take his money, and bring it back to Gotham. I didn't even have to hurt him, the guy just handed it over, easy fucking peasy. I didn't even know his real name. You gotta believe me!"

Unfortunately, Batman did. His hope of finding a good suspect in Lavaste, and maybe even closing this case tonight, was fading right before his eyes.

Lavaste was still babbling. "Fucking Metropolis, man, I should've known that weasel was into something really shady. But whatever it is, Batman, I don't know anything about it, I swear. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. A, uh, what do you call it? An innocent bystander or something."

"Something is right," Batman retorted, letting go. Lavaste stumbled back into the couch, but he righted himself a second later. "You're hardly innocent, Gabriel."

To Batman's surprise, Lavaste grimaced. "Yeah. Yeah, I know," he said. He sucked a bit of spilled beer off his hand. "That's why I broke out. Weird as that sounds."

Batman tilted his head, curious, and Lavaste sighed. "Look, you got me, okay? Dead to rights. I killed those poor fuckers, and I'm going away for a long time. Even if my lawyer manages to get me a plea

deal, I doubt I'll see the light of day any time soon. So I figured, what the hell, and I pulled every string I had to get one last trip to Metropolis."

He paused for a swig of beer. "Why not make it a permanent one?" Batman asked. "Why did you come back here?"

Lavaste shrugged. "Gotta do my time," he said. "I just wanted the chance to say goodbye to Rosanna and the kids first."

"Girlfriend?" Batman guessed.

"Daughter," Lavaste corrected him, and sighed again. "She told me years ago that her kids wouldn't even know they had a granddad, but I had to try. For all the good it did. She slammed the door in my fucking face."

"Why?"

"You're a nosy bastard, aren't you?" he said with a gravelly laugh. "I don't know. Maybe it's because I'm a loser who talks to Batman about my life of crime in the middle of the night? Or maybe I just fucked up way too many times for her to ever forgive me. Take your pick. Either way, I haven't earned the right to be the granddad to her kids. I sure as hell wasn't a dad to her."

Batman watched Lavaste finish his beer. *I'm sorry,* he thought, but didn't say it. Instead, he pinged the GCPD through his gauntlet comm. They'd have a patrol car waiting in front of the building in a few minutes.

"Thanks," said Lavaste a moment later, setting down the empty beer can.

"Come on," Batman said. "The police are downstairs."

"Yeah," Lavaste sighed. "Yeah, okay."

Batman gripped his bicep and led him towards the apartment door. If he'd put up a fight, they would have taken the balcony, but there was no point if Lavaste was going to come quietly, and, frankly, Batman was tired.

The hallway was thankfully empty, and the elevator only took a few seconds to arrive. As they descended to the ground floor, Batman decided to break the heavy silence.

“Gabriel,” he said. Lavaste actually jumped. “If your daughter doesn’t want you in her life, that’s her decision, and you shouldn’t force it. But you *can* try to change. To try and become the man she wishes you were. It’s not too late.”

Lavaste was staring now, his mouth hanging open. “You, uh. You feeling okay, Bats?” he asked. Batman scowled in annoyance. “You usually give out bruises more than life advice.”

“It’s not too late for that, either,” Batman threatened, squeezing Lavaste’s upper arm just hard enough to hurt.

The breath that Lavaste let out was half-laugh, half-wince. “That’s more like it,” he said, as the elevator doors opened on a sea of flashing blue and red lights.

Bruce’s eyes itched with fatigue. He’d been staring at the screen of the Batcomputer for too long again. Outside, above ground, the sun had no doubt risen, but Bruce hadn’t been to bed yet. He hadn’t showered, either. He hadn’t even removed all of the suit.

If anyone asked, he’d say he’d been working all night. But that was hardly true. Yes, he’d started a deeper dive into Cronin’s finances. He’d stared at crime scene photos and re-read the autopsy reports for the four scientists who had died mysteriously in Gotham over the last six months. But while this was *work,* it wasn’t what he was really doing tonight.

He was running. And he couldn’t quite convince himself to stop.

He knew he had to stop. He even *wanted* to stop. He knew he was at a dead end. He knew he wasn’t actually accomplishing anything down here. He knew there were people upstairs—a person, a *kid*—who needed him to stop. Yet here he was. Still.

(*You just can’t help yourself, can you?)*

Alfred would come down soon, once he discovered Bruce’s absence. Would Bruce get a lecture today? Or a pitying look and a firm reminder to shower and go to bed? Maybe just a quiet *tsk* and an implied promise that he would clean up the mess Bruce left behind, like always.

A blinking light caught his eye. It was on his abandoned gauntlet. He reached out and hit a few keys, routing the call to the computer

instead of the cowl.

“Oh, good, you’re still up,” said Jim Gordon’s voice through the speakers the instant the call connected. He always knew to talk first.

“Commissioner,” Batman managed after a moment. “What can I do for you?”

“Nothing, really,” Gordon replied. “I just got to the station and got the news about Lavaste. What did he say? Any updates on Dr. Rota’s case?”

Batman knew why he was asking. Dr. Michaela Rota’s death was the most high-profile of the former LexCorp scientists, and her family was pressuring the GCPD almost every day.

Batman sighed. “Unfortunately, no.” He filled Jim in on what he and Lavaste had talked about. Or, most of it, anyway.

“Proves there’s a connection to Falcone,” Gordon pointed out. “Nice to have that confirmed.”

“I suppose,” Batman agreed.

They had suspected as much since a close analysis of Dr. Rota’s car crash had revealed striking similarities to a so-called accident that happened two years ago. That crash had killed someone set to testify against Don Falcone, and, without its star witness, the case against him had crumbled.

“If Cronin was paying Falcone off, then that’s pretty damning,” said Gordon.

“Yes,” said Batman, but Jim clearly caught the note of hesitation in his voice.

“Given that he got her job, we could say he had motive,” Gordon went on. “Rota was the only one still working for LexCorp when she died. But it kinda falls apart when you remember there are three other victims.”

“None of whom were a threat to Cronin’s position at LexCorp,” Batman added. “I think this is bigger than one man’s petty grievance against his boss.”

“What do you know about Cronin?” Gordon asked. “Any ties to

Gotham crime families?"

"I'm looking," Batman answered. "Nothing yet."

Jim hummed thoughtfully, then fell silent. He didn't hang up, however. Over the line, Batman could hear the faint sounds of the GCPD bullpen, probably through Jim's open office door. Keyboards clacked, men talked and laughed. If not for the fact that cops worked twelve-hour shifts, and Jim tended to start his as early as possible, Batman would think that it was much later in the day.

Unless it actually *was* late, and he'd fucked up all possibility of having a normal day today.

Dammit. He'd promised Samantha that he'd treat her to lunch today. It was her six-month anniversary as his personal assistant, and he hadn't scared her off yet. That deserved celebration.

And, after work, he was supposed to take Tim out for dinner before his Spanish conversation group. Bruce could tell he was nervous about going, so he'd hoped that a little one-on-one time might help him relax beforehand. He'd researched another historical cold case for them to talk about. He was looking forward to seeing how Tim picked it apart.

...God. Even his non-work was all about the work.

(You are something else, aren't you?)

How many times could he keep making the same mistakes?

"Batman? You still there?"

"Yes," Batman answered curtly.

"So, what do you think?"

Batman hadn't heard a single word that Jim had just said, but he could guess. "I think our next step is to find out what in the hell Sebastian Cronin is doing in bed with Don Falcone."

"Yes, obviously," Jim agreed. He sounded annoyed, but there wasn't anything Batman could do about that. "I've told my people to keep their ears open for any news about the Don, but Falcone's guys seem pretty tight-lipped. Either they're planning some strike back at the Maronis and they're playing it real close to the chest, or... hell, I don't

know what they're up to."

Batman grunted agreement. Since one of Maroni's low-level lieutenants was busted for taking out a Falcone runner down by the marina a few months ago, there'd been a rumour that Falcone wasn't willing to let the justice system be the only source of punishment for the Maronis. But that was just a rumour— so far, anyway.

"I was hoping Bug might lend a hand, but I haven't heard a peep from them since they sent the Maroni evidence," Jim continued. "You got anything on your end?"

Bug—short for shutterbug, Batman presumed—was Jim's name for the snitch who occasionally sent pictures and leads to the GCPD and, by extension, Batman. Jim was more or less convinced that Bug was also behind what Dick called the batarazzi blog, but Batman wasn't. The batarazzi had thousands of online followers; Bug preferred to stay out of the spotlight— physical parcels, when delivered, were never left in the same place twice. And when it came to the Maroni murder pictures, Bug had somehow gained remote access to Jim's office computer and, in a stunning show of audacity, had left them in a folder on his desktop. The batarazzi, while savvy enough to disguise their IP and scrub the metadata from their images, didn't seem nearly smart enough to pull something like that off.

"No. Nothing," Batman said, in answer to Jim's question.

There was a pause. "You don't think the Maronis got them, do you?"

Batman drew in a careful breath. "I think that if the Maronis got a snitch, we'd have found a body by now."

"Yeah. Yeah," Jim agreed with a heavy sigh. "Still. I hope Bug's alright."

Batman wasn't going to offer an idle platitude. Jim probably wouldn't believe it, anyway. This was Gotham.

Jim could clearly tell that he was done talking. With a quip about letting nocturnal creatures rest, he disconnected, leaving Batman—leaving *Bruce*—in a silent and empty Cave, half in his suit and half out of it, desperately in need of a shower and sleep, but still unable to shake off the gloom long enough to do either.

Alfred eventually appeared at the foot of the stairs. As expected, he exhaled a sigh that could have been frustrated, disappointed, or even

angry, because he walked over to the computer terminal and hit the power button for the display.

Bruce blinked at the abruptly black screens, then turned to find Alfred watching him with a small, sad smile.

“You are nothing like Gabriel Lavaste,” he said.

Bruce frowned. He’d imagined Alfred saying many things when he came down to the Cave, but this wasn’t one of them.

“I wish I’d said that sooner,” Alfred went on. “I should have known, or guessed, that you needed to hear that. I should not have believed you, when you returned and assured me that it was just the dead end in the case that was bothering you. I should have known better, and, I assure you, it will not happen again.”

Bruce stared at him. “You heard that, last night?” he managed to ask after a long moment.

“All that and more,” Alfred said delicately.

Bruce understood at once that he meant the tense conversation he’d had with Dick on the rooftop. He rubbed his dry eyes. There was a headache building behind them that he’d been ignoring for at least two hours now.

“He’ll come round,” Alfred added in a gentle voice.

“And how do you know that?” asked Bruce behind his hands.

“Because you did,” Alfred answered, with no hesitation.

Bruce swallowed hard. He didn’t know if he believed that or not. Still —

“Can you say it again?” he asked, ashamed of how small and weak he sounded.

“You are nothing like Gabriel Lavaste,” Alfred repeated, slowly and clearly. “Master Dick will not slam the door in your face. You have not lost him.”

Not yet maybe, said the voice in the back of Bruce’s head that told him to keep running.

“You have made mistakes, of course,” Alfred went on. “No father—no

person—is perfect. But it's never too late to do better. And... you will. I believe in you, Bruce. When you set your mind to something, you will achieve it."

Slowly, Bruce lowered his hands from his face. He could count on his fingers the number of times Alfred had addressed him without the formal title. He knew what that meant.

"Thank you," he said, nearly choking on the words.

Alfred nodded solemnly. "Now," he said after a pause. "Should I set the espresso brewing, or are you going to sleep after you take your shower?"

"Sleep," Bruce said, and he actually pushed himself up and away from the computer.

"An excellent plan," said Alfred.

He reached out and put an arm around Bruce's shoulders and guided him, like he was wounded, towards the showers. Bruce let him, leaning into the warm, familiar touch.

"Okay," Bruce said, mostly to himself, when they reached their destination. Alfred let him go, and Bruce smiled for the first time in almost a full day. "Thank you. Good morning, Alfred," he said.

Alfred smiled, too. "Good morning. Welcome back, Master Bruce."

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Tim gets an unexpected voicemail.

“Hey, Tim, it’s Lillian. I have good news! Your parents reached out today, and they asked for a supervised visit this weekend. I know it’s short notice, but I’ll move heaven and earth to make it happen if you want, because it’s your birthday, and it’s so nice your parents want to see you. Just let me know as soon as you can— call me back or email, okay? Talk soon, Tim. Bye.”

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for instances of child abuse (verbal/emotional abuse), dissociation, and PTSD flashbacks. A more detailed warning (with spoilers) can be found in the endnotes. Please take care.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim ran a hand through his wet hair, sweeping it back from his forehead, then shook the water from his fingers. The droplets hit the floor like rain, leaving black specks on the concrete surface. Around him, the change room was thinning out, with only a handful of boys still packing up. They had to get out soon, with the public free swim starting at 5:30.

He stuffed his wet shorts into the waterproof bag that he’d brought, and rubbed his hair with his towel before he crammed that into the bag too. Then he shoved the whole thing unceremoniously into his backpack. As ever, he felt the slight rush of panic when he lifted his bag to move it and noticed how little it weighed. He had to remind himself that his laptop and camera—and the program from Haly’s Circus, and the old Polaroid with him and the Flying Graysons, and the three photos of Batman and Robin that he’d allowed himself to keep—were safe in his room at Wayne Manor. Nobody would take them from him. Nobody would snoop. He’d been there almost a month now, and neither Alfred nor Bruce had ever entered his room without express permission. And he’d never come back to find that the folded pieces of paper he’d tucked in between the desk drawers had fallen out, so if they had gone into his room when he wasn’t there, they hadn’t gone looking for anything that wasn’t already out on

display.

Shaking off the paranoia, he sat on the hard wooden bench to pull on his socks and shoes as the room continued to empty out around him. He noticed the sound of one of the bathroom stall doors opening, then closing. There was no flush of the toilet or water running at the sink, so Tim knew who it was. Sure enough, a moment later, Pat crossed the room, swim trunks in hand. The two of them exchanged a quick smile, and Tim went back to his shoes.

He tied the laces slowly. He and Pat had walked out together every afternoon since their first lesson, when a couple of the bigger boys knocked Pat's bag to the ground as they were all leaving the change room. Tim had watched the group carefully, wondering if he should intervene—hoping that he wouldn't have to—but the boys had just laughed and hurried off, telling 'Patty' that they'd see 'her' tomorrow. Ever since, Tim conveniently managed to exit the pool building at the exact same time as Pat.

He and Pat had struck up friendly conversation as they waited in the parking lot for their rides home. Pat was shy, but kind, and sometimes really funny. The two of them talked about anime, with Pat keeping up with some of the series that Tim had lost track of over the last year. Also, Pat had a t-shirt printed with Sidney Paget's original illustration of Sherlock Holmes and Moriarty fighting at the Reichenbach Falls, which was just... neat. Pat was a much bigger Sherlock Holmes fan than Tim, who liked the movies but found the old-fashioned language of the original stories boring and hard to follow. Cool artwork, though.

Today, Pat was telling him about Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's belief in ghosts, which made Tim laugh before he thought twice and realized that that might offend Pat. It didn't, thankfully, and the topic filled the five or so minutes it took for the two of them to finish packing up their things and head out to the back parking lot. Bruce was already waiting for Tim, behind the wheel of the boring brown sedan that he drove when he wanted to be incognito, and Tim recognized the SUV at the other end of the row as belonging to Pat's mother.

"Well, see you Monday," he said, preparing to part ways. "Have a good weekend, Pat."

"Um," said Pat, which was not what Tim was expecting. He waited, and after a second Pat went on. "Do you think, uh. Do you maybe wanna hang out sometime? Like, somewhere that's not here?"

Tim blinked. “Oh. Uh... yeah,” he said, surprised to discover that it felt true when he said it. “Okay. What do you want to do?”

Pat shrugged. “Maybe we could go to a movie or something? Or, there’s a new arcade over in Kingston. My brother could drive us.” Pat’s eyes hovered over Tim’s shoulder for a second. “If, you know, if your dad’s cool with that.”

Tim thought it was best to just ignore the last part of that sentence entirely. “When?” he asked instead.

Pat shrugged again. “Saturday?”

“Ah, I can’t,” said Tim with genuine regret. “Saturday’s my birthday, so we’re having, like, a dinner thing.”

“Oh, happy birthday!” Pat exclaimed. “And that’s okay, don’t worry about it. Maybe we can go next week or something.”

“Sure,” said Tim, smiling. “And thanks.”

Pat nodded. “Have fun with your family. I’ll see you at class on Monday.”

“Yeah,” Tim agreed, and they went their separate ways.

Bruce waved as Tim approached the sedan, and Tim lifted a hand to wave back. Thursday night dinners out had become a tradition by now; they’d been doing it since Tim’s first Spanish conversation class, the day after he discovered that he’d accidentally photographed a wanted felon. Tim was sure, when Bruce suggested dinner that night, that he was about to learn that Nightwing had ratted him out to Batman after all, but no. Despite seeming tired—the news about Lavaste’s return to Blackgate probably had something to do with that—Bruce was entirely civilian with him, if a little troubled by how much Tim knew about the Hinterkaifeck murders.

As Tim opened the back passenger door of the car, he wondered what cold case Bruce would bring up tonight. He was hoping for an old West train robbery; he’d never known if that was a real thing that happened or just something they made up for the movies.

Bruce turned his head to watch Tim set his backpack on the seat. “Hey, how was swimming?”

“Didn’t drown,” Tim reported, shutting the door again.

It was only when he'd settled in the front seat and put his seatbelt on that he realized Bruce was still watching him. He wasn't smiling anymore.

"What did that kid say to you?" he asked. No, it was more like a demand.

"What?" said Tim, his anxiety spiking. "Nothing. Pat asked if I wanted to hang out this weekend, that's all. I said I was busy."

"Oh," said Bruce, relaxing somewhat. "Do you... want to hang out with Pat?"

"Um. Yes?" said Tim, like it was a question. "I mean, if that's okay. I— Pat's cool. I would like to hang out— but I understand if—"

"No," Bruce cut in, and he smiled again. "No, Tim, that's great. If you want to hang out with Pat, you should hang out with Pat."

"Okay," Tim said slowly, still not understanding the reason for the freak-out.

Bruce obviously read the question in his tone, because he looked embarrassed. "Sorry," he said. "I thought... the way you said you didn't drown, I thought maybe that meant things were bad. You know, like, you didn't drown, but nothing else went well? I thought maybe Pat upset you, or something... if that... makes sense?"

Tim had never heard Bruce sound so hesitant. It took him a second to even understand what Bruce was saying, and then he laughed, partly in relief and partly because it was *hilarious.*

"Now I realize you just speaking teenager," Bruce concluded with some chagrin.

Tim laughed harder. "I do that sometimes," he said.

Bruce's face was legitimately red now. "Alfred will never let me live this down," he said, starting the car's engine. "What will it take to buy your silence?"

What an offer, Tim thought. Never in a million years had he imagined he would hear that question from Batman. He grinned.

"Ice cream after Spanish group?"

Bruce put the car in gear. "Deal."

Tim's phone rang during Spanish group. Not that he answered it, of course. He didn't even hear it, as his phone was on silent and tucked in the outer pouch of his backpack. But he saw the notification as he leaving the library study room.

The group had let out a few minutes early. Many of the members hung around and chatted longer, but Tim didn't feel like it. Unlike swim class, he didn't really have any friends here. Most of the members were older— the only other high school student was in his senior year and clearly thought Tim was beneath him. The senior citizens liked Tim well enough, probably for the same reasons that Mrs. Mac always liked him, but it wasn't like they were friends. The group leader, Señora Alvarez, was super nice, though. She smiled and waved as Tim left the study room.

He glanced back down at his phone again and saw that the call he'd missed was from Lillian. Not only that, she'd left a voicemail. He picked up the pace, heading through the front foyer to a side corridor where he knew there was a bench. He set his backpack down and dialed his voicemail as he sat down beside it. He tried not to look as worried as he felt when other group members and strangers filed past him towards the front door.

Then he listened to the message, and he stopped caring about how he looked.

"Hey, Tim, it's Lillian. I have good news! Your parents reached out today, and they asked for a supervised visit this weekend. I know it's short notice, but I'll move heaven and earth to make it happen if you want, because it's your birthday, and it's so nice your parents want to see you. Just let me know as soon as you can— call me back or email, okay? Talk soon, Tim. Bye."

Tim stared at the exposed brick of the library wall, trying to make the words make sense. His parents had never asked to see him, not since the first week after he was taken away from them.

And that conversation... Tim didn't want to remember that conversation.

"This was all just a big misunderstanding, Timothy. You know Mrs. Mac, she gets confused."

"Confused? Off her rocker, more like. Now, listen here, boy. My lawyers are all over this. They're putting together the paperwork as we speak."

“It’s a letter, Timothy. A letter that tells the truth— that Mrs. Mac wasn’t looking after you the way she was supposed to.”

Tim didn’t want to remember this.

“Your mother and I both know we never hurt you. We fed and clothed you, we kept a roof over your head, we made sure you always went to school and never made any trouble. We raised you better than this, and you know it.”

“Your father’s right, Timothy. Really, couldn’t you have talked to Mrs. Mac before it went this far? If she knew how responsible you are, then she never would’ve said anything to anybody, and we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“Mess is right. Do you any idea how much trouble you’ve caused? Work’s a nightmare, I’ve got the PR department up my ass every time I turn around. Share prices are down, the board’s about ready to mutiny, and it’s all because you *couldn’t keep your damn mouth shut.”*

“Jack!”

“You said I could handle this, I’m handling it, Janet. We’re a family company, *Timothy, do you know what this has done to our reputation? Do you even have any idea how good you’ve had it? You never had to want for a single goddamn thing your whole life, and now you go and pull a stunt like this?”*

Tim didn’t want to—

“Zack will get the letter to you soon, dear. We want you to sign it and give it back to him right away, okay? Then you can come home, and we can all just forget this ever happened.”

“Forget’s a strong word. Listen to me, Timothy. You will sign that affidavit. You will clean up your own mess for once in your goddamned life, and you will come home. And then, *you will sit alone, in your room, until you learn some respect, some appreciation, some—”*

“Tim?”

Who was talking to him? The brick wall was blurry. Tim couldn’t make his eyes move to see who it was.

“¿Tim, qué pasa?”

Oh. It was Señora Alvarez. Nice of her to come by.

It's so nice your parents want to see you.

No one was talking to him anymore. Now, it was just him and the wall. Quiet. Until—

"Right over here, Mr. Wayne, I'm not sure what—"

"Tim?" A new voice. "Hey, Tim? Can you look at me?"

Tim felt his eyelids fall. The wall disappeared, then reappeared when his eyelids rose again. No, that wasn't the wall. What was it?

He blinked again. The blurry shape before him slowly turned into Bruce's face.

Wait. Bruce?

"Yeah, it's me, Tim. I'm right here."

Oh. Did Tim say that out loud? He didn't hear it.

"Is he alright?"

"I'll handle it. *Gracias, Señora Alvarez."*

High heels clicking on the floor. Going away. Tim blinked again.

"Tim? I'm going to touch your shoulder now, okay?"

Warm pressure through the fabric of his t-shirt. Tim felt it from a million miles away. Weird.

"Can you wiggle your fingers for me?"

Also weird. Tim concentrated. Where were his fingers again? There. There, he got it. Something rough was under them. That was how he knew they were moving.

"Good. That's really good. Now try your toes."

Toes. Right. Okay. Were his fingers supposed to keep moving while he did? Or did he have to stop one to start the other? His eyelids were moving, too. Bruce's face kept flickering in and out of existence.

He felt his sock, the flexible barrier of his sneaker toe. A strange

creaky-shuffling noise that he slowly realized was the sole of his shoe on the library's hardwood floor. He was still at the library?

"Good," said Bruce again. Bruce was here. Also at the library. "Do you think you can talk?"

Tim remembered he had a mouth when he swallowed, lungs when he breathed in. "Yeah," he heard himself say.

"That's really good, Tim, you're doing really well," said Bruce. He sounded... relieved? "Now I want you to look around a little, okay? Tell me some things you can see."

Tim moved his eyes. Like his fingertips and his toes, it was slow. His familiar friend, the wall, was there, right behind Bruce, no longer blurry. And there were other things, too, now that he looked.

"Sign for the bathroom," he said. "Bulletin board. Chandelier."

How many things was he supposed to see? Bruce was nodding, so he kept going.

"Water fountain. Poster for a garage sale. New arrivals display."

"Great," said Bruce. "That's great, Tim."

He'd gone from *good* to *great.* That had to mean something, right?

"Now how about something you can feel with your body?" asked Bruce.

Tim frowned, swallowed again. Looked down slightly. "Your hand's on my shoulder," he said.

"It is," Bruce agreed. "Do you want me to move it?"

Tim shook his head. He didn't know why, but he definitely did not want that.

"Okay. Can you feel anything else?"

Tim thought for a second. "Yeah," he said, twitching his fingertips. "My jeans." He wiggled his toes. "My socks. My shoes." Then he shifted his entire foot. "The floor. The bench."

"That's great," Bruce said again. "Can you hear anything?"

“Yes,” said Tim at once, because of course he could hear. There were people, just over there, checking out books, using computers. A child was babbling somewhere. Maybe in the bathroom.

“What do you hear?” Bruce asked.

Tim told him. Then he breathed in and shifted against the bench. It really wasn’t that comfortable. Why had he been sitting here for so long?

His eyes fell on his phone. When had it fallen to the floor? He leaned forward and reached out to pick it up. The movement seemed to startle Bruce, who pulled his arm off Tim’s shoulder like he’d been burned.

“Sorry,” said Tim automatically, and Bruce shook his head quickly. He pushed himself up and sat down at Tim’s side.

“Lillian called me, too,” he said, looking down at Tim’s phone. “I was hoping you wouldn’t have a chance to listen to her message until we got home. Just in case it upset you.”

Upset. Was Tim upset? Bruce put his arm around his shoulder before Tim had an answer to that question.

“But I guess your group let out a little early,” Bruce went on. “I was just coming inside when Señora Alvarez found me.”

“Thanks,” Tim murmured, even though he knew she was long gone.

They sat in silence on that hard, uncomfortable bench for a moment, then Bruce asked, “Do you want to see them?” When Tim didn’t answer, he added, “It’s okay if the answer is no.”

“It’s not,” said Tim quietly. “It’s... I don’t know what it is.”

“That’s okay, too,” said Bruce. “You don’t need to decide right this minute. And—” He turned slightly, and nudged Tim to turn as well, so they were facing each other. “And no matter what,” he said, “we’re still having your birthday dinner. We’ll change the date if we have to, but it’s not like you can only have one or the other. Okay?”

It was kind—and kind of naïve—that Bruce thought he was worried about that, but it made a sort of sense. Bruce didn’t know—nobody knew—about his parents’ one and only disastrous visit. Not even Lillian. Tim had a different case worker then, a man named Zack, and

he hadn't recorded anything about that visit in Tim's official file. Tim had a theory as to why— and it had everything to do with a flash of green that passed between his father and Zack's hands that morning. After that visit, however, Tim never saw Zack again. The affidavit never materialized, Lillian took over as Tim's case worker, and Tim's parents never reached out about another possible visit.

Until today.

But Tim was too tired to get into all that again. So he just nodded and asked Bruce if they could leave the library.

"Yeah." Bruce got to his feet, picking up Tim's backpack for him. "Did you still want to go for ice cream?"

"Oh," said Tim, surprised. The conversation in the car after swimming felt like a lifetime ago. "Yeah, okay."

A relieved smile flickered over Bruce's face. He handed Tim's backpack to him and followed him out to the parking lot. The night air was sweet and still warm, the sky a deep blue backdrop for skyscrapers and the overhead train tracks. Tim breathed deeply and felt something in the centre of his chest relax.

"Actually, can we walk?" he asked, once he'd put his backpack in the car and Bruce had circled around to the driver's side.

"You want to walk to get ice cream?" said Bruce. Tim still wasn't used to the thought that Batman could be so easily caught off-guard. "Is there even an ice cream place around here?"

"There is," said Tim. He pointed northwest. "About three blocks that way."

Bruce blinked at him over the roof of the car. "Oh, yeah. Sprinkles 'n' Swirls, right?"

Tim nodded innocently. Bruce no doubt knew what Tim knew—that the place was a front for the Irish mob—but every homegrown Gothamite knew that some of the best restaurants in town were run by crime syndicates. It didn't change the fact that they had good food.

"Tim, I don't know if that's such a good idea," said Bruce with seemingly genuine hesitation. "It's getting dark, it might not be safe."

"It's not even nine-thirty," Tim pointed out, a lot snippier than he

meant to be. He bit his tongue before he could say something stupid like, *You're Batman, we'll be fine.*

"Okay," Bruce said, to Tim's surprise. But he opened the back door and pulled out a ball cap and a scuffed leather jacket before he clicked his fob to lock the car. "Let's walk."

As they crossed the library parking lot, Tim had to admit: with the jacket and cap on top of dark jeans and a red button-down, it wasn't likely anyone would recognize him as Bruce Wayne, Billionaire Playboy Philanthropist. Which was obviously the point. Tim felt a brief stab of guilt for that, because Bruce knew better than anybody how dangerous the streets of Gotham could be for someone who seemed like they had money. But, Tim reminded himself, if Bruce was that concerned, he could have said no and insisted on driving. Bruce *was* the grown-up in this situation, after all.

After just a few minutes, Tim found himself losing track of specific thoughts or worries. The city enveloped him, opening its arms to him for the first time in months, and he soaked it all in as they walked. Skyscraper windows shining above him like grinning teeth, the clatter of the elevated trains, the rush of steam from a sidewalk vent. Disjointed beats of music from competing bars, laughter and cigarette smoke from the mouth of an alley, the string of profanity let loose by a pedestrian cut off at the corner. The cathedral clock chiming out the quarter-hour, neon signs flashing and flickering, sidelong glances from men in dark coats, sirens and honking cars in the distance.

Home.

Oh, he'd missed it. He missed it like water, like breathing. He longed for his camera, a rooftop, and solitude. But right now, as they waited at the intersection across from Sprinkles 'n' Swirls, he'd settle for a longer walk.

The redhead behind the counter barely looked at either of them when she took their order, and replied to Bruce's wishing her a good night with "Okay." Tim snickered into his cup of mocha chocolate chip as they walked out; this place's success clearly wasn't due to its stellar customer service.

Bruce relaxed after they'd left. Not that anyone else would have seen the difference, but Tim had been noticing things about Bruce Wayne that most people missed for years.

"Thank you," he said while they waited again for the light.

Bruce glanced over, surprised again. “You’re welcome. I promised you ice cream, didn’t I?”

“No,” said Tim, then— “Well, yes. But I meant thanks for letting me walk here.”

“Oh,” said Bruce, but Tim could tell he was puzzling something out. After a moment, he said, “A walk’s always good to clear your head.”

Tim looked all around them, at the skyscrapers, and the trains, and the neon signs. He thought about everything that Bruce had done for him in the last few weeks. He thought of Bruce’s patience with him in the library, in Metropolis, at dinner with his actual son. He remembered the email to Lillian.

I’m optimistic, he’d said.

It was a good word for a warm summer night with ice cream melting in his hand. *Optimistic.* Even if Tim still had to deal with the huge looming mess on the horizon that was his parents. Even if Bruce knew Tim was his stalker and was only keeping him close to keep an eye on him. Even if Tim had no chance of getting out at night with his camera any time soon.

But maybe, he decided, he could trust Bruce with one tiny part of the truth.

“I love this city,” he said when they stopped at the next light.

“Me, too,” said Bruce.

“I know,” said Tim, with careful emphasis, and he looked up to gauge Bruce’s reaction to this.

But there wasn’t one, really. Just a glance down, still with that easy smile. Tim filed that away for further consideration later.

The light changed, and they kept walking, side by side through the Gotham City night.

Chapter End Notes

More detailed trigger warning (spoilers):

In this chapter, Tim receives a phone call from his case worker, Lillian, who tells him that his parents have reached out to request a visit with him. After listening to Lillian’s voicemail, Tim falls

into a severe dissociative episode where he remembers the last time he saw his parents. His parents had bribed his former case worker to have an unofficial visit, which was kept out of his file.

In Tim's memory, his parents call him ungrateful, since they always made sure he was fed and clothed, and they never 'really' hurt him. They berate their housekeeper, Mrs. Mac, for being 'confused' about the situation with Tim (namely, that his parents were neglectful). They say that their lawyers are drawing up an affidavit for him to sign, which alleged that no abuse took place and that Mrs. Mac was the one responsible for Tim's neglect (not his parents). They blame him for getting them in trouble, suggesting that he should have predicted that Mrs. Mac would misunderstand the situation, and he should have talked her out of reporting them to the state for neglect/abuse.

Tim's father blames Tim for Drake Industries' financial troubles, since the news of his parents' neglect impacted the company's reputation. Tim's father suggests that, even once the affidavit is signed, Tim will still be punished and left isolated in his bedroom, since 'this whole mess' was his fault. Tim's father is angry during this conversation, swearing and raising his voice. His mother is kinder, but she fully supports her husband in this scenario and doesn't protest very much at his behaviour.

...I know all that sounds really bad, but before this part, Tim makes a new friend at swimming. After this part, Bruce talks Tim out of the flashback/dissociative episode, gives him a hug, and then they go out for ice cream.

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Tim sees his parents.

Suddenly, there they were. Tim felt immediately underdressed. His father was in a full suit and tie, with shiny shoes and slicked-back hair. His mother wore an immaculate white linen blazer over her pale blue dress. Diamond-studded hoops hung from her ears, and a string of pearls rested at the base of her throat. In other words, they looked exactly how Tim remembered, right down to the handful of grey hairs scattered throughout his mother's blonde bob, and his father's perfect fingernails.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for verbal abuse, awkwardness, passive aggression and, uh, aggression-aggression? Tim's dad is really rude and yells in the direction of Tim a few times. As with the previous chapter, a more detailed warning (with spoilers) can be found in the endnotes. Please take care.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the end of the day on Friday, they had it all worked out. Dick was still coming to stay for the weekend, but Tim's birthday dinner would be on Sunday night instead. Tim was going downtown to Lillian's office to see his parents on Saturday afternoon.

Bruce had offered to let them come to the manor, but something about that suggestion turned Tim's stomach. He didn't know why, but he didn't want his parents anywhere near Bruce or Wayne Manor. Which was silly and didn't make any sense. The manor was much closer to his parents' house, and besides, they'd been there several times already. They'd *met Bruce* several times already. But for some reason that Tim couldn't articulate—not even to himself—the thought of Jack and Janet Drake in this house, whether Bruce stayed on the opposite side of the manor as he promised or not... Tim just didn't like it.

In fact, he liked the idea of his parents talking to Bruce so little that, on Saturday morning, he asked Dick if he could drive him downtown instead of Bruce or Alfred.

The question surprised Dick, who raised his head from his waffles like

one of those pointy-eared dogs that sniffed out drugs at the airport. At once, his eyes went to Bruce, and Tim silently cursed himself. Things hadn't been tense, exactly, between Bruce and Dick, but they weren't very warm with each other, either, and they almost never hung out one-on-one. Even when Tim purposefully left the room to give them a chance to talk without him getting in the way, it wouldn't be long before one of them came out, or Alfred went in. It worried Tim. It made his stomach drop— to the point that Alfred noticed once and asked if he was feeling well.

So he probably shouldn't have stirred things up this morning. But Bruce's reaction to Dick's look was imperceptible, even to Tim, and when Dick looked back at Tim, he was smiling. Tim relaxed at once.

"Sure, I can drive you if you want," Dick said. "What time do you need to be there?"

Tim told him, and Dick nodded, saying it wouldn't be a problem. The rest of breakfast passed without incident, but Bruce disappeared upstairs for a little while after the meal, leaving Tim to hang out with Dick in the games room, where he was teaching Dick how to play an old fighting game.

"No, but like—" Dick said with a frustrated sigh, after losing the third match in a row. "I told him to block, why wasn't my little dude blocking?"

"Were you trying to punch at the same time?" Tim asked.

(He knew for a fact that Dick was, and since he had less than a zero percent chance of ever beating Dick in a real fight, he thought it was okay to be a little smug.)

"No," Dick said, then he frowned down at the controller. "I mean, maybe. I was trying to do that block-then-counter thing I was doing in the tutorial."

"Oh," said Tim, understanding at once. "Okay, hang on."

He exited the fight and went back to the single-player tutorial. He selected Dick's so-called *little dude* and handed the controller over to him.

"You did the tutorial with a different character," Tim explained. "Each character's counter has slightly different timing. Sorry, I forgot to tell you about that."

“Convenient,” Dick muttered, as he tried out the new technique. Tim grinned.

“There you go, you got it,” he said, when Dick managed the counter.

“Timing is everything,” Dick agreed.

“It’s easier in the tutorial, though,” said Tim, and because he wasn’t above trash-talking his opponent a little, he added, “when I’m not kicking your butt.”

“Bring it on,” Dick challenged, landing the counter move perfectly once more.

Tim was still watching the screen when the tutorial’s victory tune played, and the controller hit his hands. He fumbled, trying to catch it while his brain was still figuring out that Dick had tossed it to him. But his hand knocked the controller up higher by accident. It went flying out of reach, and he winced because it was about to hit the glass-topped coffee table—

—but Dick somehow, *impossibly,* snagged the controller out of the air before it collided, and handed it back to him with a laugh.

“You think you can beat me with *those* reflexes? Please,” he scoffed, but he softened the words by knocking his shoulder gently against Tim’s.

Tim’s face was burning—partly with embarrassment and partly with amazement because *holy shit Nightwing was fast*—but he laughed, too, and started a new two-player match. They selected their characters, waited for the countdown...

...and Tim lost twelve times in a row.

Lillian met them in the lobby. Bruce must have called ahead, because she didn’t seem at all surprised by Dick’s presence. Instead, she smiled and asked Tim if he wanted Dick to sit with him during the visit.

Tim didn’t know that was an option. By the look on Dick’s face, he didn’t either. “No, I’ll be fine on my own,” Tim said, before Dick could offer.

“Are you sure?” Dick asked, and Tim nodded.

“I can just call you when I’m done, if you want to go back to the

manor," he added.

Dick shook his head and sank into one of the chairs in the lobby. "I'll wait for you," he said. "In case you need anything."

"You really don't have to do that," Tim started to say, but Dick interrupted him.

"Ooh, they've got the good tabloids," he said, reaching for one of the newspapers on the table. "Mothman had a *baby?* Well, I'm hooked now, I gotta know more."

Tim ducked his head, embarrassed but pleased, while Lillian laughed. "Enjoy," she said to Dick.

Dick nodded, and Tim waved with one hand as Lillian turned away and beckoned him to follow her around the reception desk and through a door that required her keycard to unlock.

Tim had been here several times over the last year, so he knew that Lillian's office was the second on the left. But Lillian walked past her door, all the way to the end of the hall and around the corner. They passed a boardroom and a kitchenette, and finally arrived at a room that looked very much like a living room. There were two small couches positioned so they were facing one another with a coffee table in between them. A child's size table and chairs stood in the corner, as well as a basket brimming with throw pillows and blankets. Shelves on the wall held books, toys, and board games.

"This is the family meeting room, Tim," said Lillian. "Sit wherever you like."

Tim didn't sit. "Are they here yet?"

"No, we're still a little early," Lillian replied. "Jenny will bring them back when they arrive."

Tim nodded as he wandered the room. He'd never seen it before. He'd assumed that he and his parents would be meeting in Lillian's office with the door closed, like the time with Zack.

"Do you want a glass of water?" Lillian asked. "Or we have juice boxes."

"Um, water?" said Tim. "Please," he added hastily.

“You got it. Be right back,” Lillian said, and she headed out into the hall, leaving the door open behind her.

While she was gone, Tim picked up a puzzle cube from one of the shelves and fiddled with it. It kept his hands busy while he second-guessed himself about agreeing to see his parents. Would they have the affidavit, he wondered, or other paperwork from their lawyers? Tim had hoped, as the months had gone by with no word, that they’d changed their minds about suing Mrs. Mac.

Maybe their lawyers had advised them that their case wouldn’t succeed, so they’d needed time to think up some new tactic to get him back. Because his father had been right about one thing the last time they saw each other: the reputation of Drake Industries had suffered, and while share prices had risen somewhat in the last year, they still hadn’t fully recovered from the hit they took when news of the Drakes’ questionable parenting first went public.

Lillian returned and set a glass of water on the coffee table. “Thank you,” Tim said. He decided he’d better sit, so he sank onto one of the couches and curled his feet up under him. His fingers spun the puzzle cube absently.

“You’re welcome,” Lillian replied, sitting down beside him. “And, before I forget: happy birthday! How’s it feel to be fifteen?”

Tim sent her a smile. “Thanks. It’s good.” He shrugged. “Not that different from fourteen so far.”

Except that I’m one step closer to emancipation, he added silently. The community legal service had finally emailed him back last week; they still didn’t think there was much point in going before a judge until he was sixteen. It was the same thing they’d said when he first left his parents’ house and started to think about alternatives to going through the foster system. At fourteen, he’d accepted the lawyers’ decision, but now it felt even more frustrating, to be closer and yet still so far from freedom.

The intercom buzzed near the door, startling Tim out of his thoughts. “Oh, they’re here,” said Lillian, picking up her clipboard. “Right on time.”

Tim nodded. His parents had a habit of being punctual when it was something they cared about. It made him feel special to be that something today. Was it because of his birthday? He let himself imagine for a moment that it was. Maybe they remembered. Maybe

they brought him a gift.

A sound in the hallway made him look up, and suddenly, there they were.

Tim felt immediately underdressed. His father was in a full suit and tie, with shiny shoes and slicked-back hair. His mother wore an immaculate white linen blazer over her pale blue dress. Diamond-studded hoops hung from her ears, and a string of pearls rested at the base of her throat. In other words, they looked exactly how Tim remembered them, right down to the handful of grey hairs scattered throughout his mother's blonde bob, and his father's perfect fingernails.

That was Tim's first sign that they'd just returned from a dig. The first thing his father always did after unpacking his suitcase was book himself a manicure. He'd explained why once, when Tim was younger, but Tim couldn't remember the reasons now. (He'd been more interested, at the time, in finding out why Jack had said no when Tim asked if he could go with him.)

The slight tan on his mother's skin confirmed that they'd been staying somewhere sunnier than Gotham. Tim wondered if she would tell him stories about it when he asked. Sometimes, when he was really little, she'd recount details of their travels. She made everything sound like some grand adventure. He used to dream of a time when he'd be big enough to go with her to see all the magical far-off places she described— even though, when he did get bigger, the answer was always no.

"Oh, Timothy," she exclaimed as she crossed the room.

Tim must have gotten to his feet at some point, because she pulled him into a tight hug. He closed his eyes—she even smelled the same—but just a few seconds later, she placed her hands on his shoulders and put some distance between them again. Her long fingers brushed his hair back from his eyes, and he couldn't help leaning into her touch. It'd been months, and he'd missed her even more than he realized.

"Your hair's gotten so long," she said, and though she was still smiling, Tim's heart sank. His mother hated long hair on boys and men. She said it made them look *slovenly,* whatever that meant.

"Yeah," he agreed, awkward. "I'm going this week to get it trimmed."

He wasn't, but her small nod of approval was worth the lie. Tim

shifted his attention to his father, and any warmth he was feeling evaporated. He could tell at a glance that Jack was unhappy about something. But he knew better than to ask, so he hitched up his smile instead.

“Hi, Dad,” he said.

Jack stepped forward, his hand outstretched like they were work colleagues. Tim shook it, feeling the familiar callouses that didn’t match his perfectly shaped and buffed fingernails.

“Son,” his father said with a curt nod. His eyes were travelling around the room like he was also surprised they were meeting in here.

“Can I get you anything to drink?” asked a pleasant female voice. Tim looked behind his parents for the first time and spotted the receptionist—Jenny, he thought Lillian had called her—lingering in the doorway. “Coffee? Water? Juice?”

“No, we’re fine,” said Janet, but Jack said, “Coffee. Black. Thanks.”

Jenny nodded and left, leaving the door open behind her. Lillian, Tim realized, had come to stand at his elbow, a warm smile on her face as she surveyed his parents.

“Shall we sit?” she asked, waving an arm toward the couches.

Tim nodded but took his cues from his father, only going when he did. His mother sat opposite him, tucking herself into the corner of the sofa and delicately crossing one leg over the other. His father, meanwhile, tossed his briefcase on the coffee table and sank into the centre cushion, his knees sprawled wide.

“So,” he began abruptly, his eyes on Lillian. “How’s this work?”

Lillian patiently explained the ground rules of the visit. Tim picked the puzzle cube up off the floor while she talked. It had fallen when it collided with Jack’s briefcase a moment ago.

Jenny returned with a mug of coffee, which she extended to Jack. He took it without thanking her again, and she left. The door remained open.

Lillian finished speaking her piece. Jack agreed to her terms with a nod, while Janet murmured a distracted, “Yes, we understand,” while she picked an invisible bit of lint off her dress.

Then... neither of them said anything.

Tim glanced uncertainly at Lillian, who gave him an encouraging nod but also stayed silent. Which made sense. As she'd just explained, she was not here to mediate or even participate. She was only an observer.

After a minute or two, Tim reached for the puzzle cube again. His father drank some coffee. Tim started to spin the rows of the cube, trying to solve it. The clicking was loud, but Tim could still hear two people down the hall, having a quiet and respectful conversation about their dogs. Tim focused on the puzzle, not sure what else to do.

His father sighed.

An unexpected spark of anger flared to life in the centre of Tim's chest. He knew that sound. He knew what it meant, and it wasn't *fair*. Why was his father allowed to make that sound—that impatient, frustrated sound—when *they* were the ones who wanted to see *him?* Tim shouldn't have to start this conversation.

And— and he knew this was childish, but it was his *birthday,* for crying out loud. Couldn't they do one thing for him, on his birthday, and break the ice?

They didn't even have to be polite, if that was too much to ask. They could just tell him what the hell they wanted. Why had they brought Tim here? Clearly, they didn't have more paperwork from their lawyer. And even if they did, Lillian had just told them that their meeting today was not to discuss custody or Tim's current living situation. So what was the point of even being here?

Tim's fingers flew over the puzzle cube, its clicks getting louder and faster as he seethed, until finally the anger started to burn itself out like a match reaching the end of its stick. He slowed down, took a breath, and reminded himself that this was just like anything else in his life. If something needed doing, he was going to have to do it himself.

"So, did you guys just get back from a dig?" he asked. "Where did you go?"

His mother's face lit up. Where Tim's anger had burned there was now a new kind of warmth.

"Oh, yes," she gushed. "We spent an amazing seven weeks in Iceland, where a team of researchers have just rediscovered a Viking village. It

was incredible, Timothy."

From there, it took very little prodding to get her to keep going—about the artifacts ("I actually uncovered a silver coin, Timothy, can you believe it?"); the history ("You know, a lot of people think the Vikings were brutes, but really they were just incredibly talented businessmen!"); and the sunlight in Iceland this time of year ("Did you know there's hardly any night in the summer? Nothing like this dreary place!"). Tim hummed encouragingly from time to time, his hands still working the puzzle cube, even when he was watching his mother talk.

Until— "Timothy," his father snapped, interrupting his mother mid-sentence.

What? Tim almost said automatically, which would have been disastrous. His eyes flew to his father and took in his clenched jaw and the crease between his eyebrows.

"Put that thing away and listen to your mother."

Tim swallowed and nodded and slowly set the cube down on the table, making sure to do it gently so it didn't make a sound. Jack waited until Tim had sat back on the couch before he inclined his head towards his wife.

"Sorry for the interruption, Janet," he said in a completely different tone. "Please, honey, go on."

At the other end of the couch, Lillian shifted slightly. Tim glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, but she didn't move again, and her polite smile was still fixed in place. Tim wished he could apologize to her; his dad was so embarrassing when he was like this, and she really didn't deserve to get caught in the crossfire.

The rest of their time together was more or less the same, filled with polite conversation, mostly between Tim and his mother. Tim watched the clock without looking at it, counting down until their sixty minutes were up. He was almost home free when his father spoke again.

"I heard you'll be returning to Gotham Academy in the fall," he said out of nowhere.

"Yes, I am," Tim replied calmly, but his heart was speeding up. How did his father know this? *Why* did his father know this?

“That’s good,” Jack said. His eyes were fixed on Tim, too intense for such a banal topic of conversation. “I hope you know better than to waste Bruce Wayne’s money.”

Unsure of how to respond to this, Tim looked to his mother. But she was picking invisible lint again, her eyes averted. Lillian came to his rescue, however, clearing her throat softly.

“We’re not here to talk about Tim’s foster parent,” she reminded Jack, kindly but with a no-nonsense edge to her voice.

“Right,” said Jack, and Tim’s face *burned,* because he knew what was coming next. “I forgot. I’m not even allowed to say the man’s name.”

“Mr. Drake,” said Lillian, a clear warning. Jack waved it away.

“I’m just saying, you’d think he’d at least have the nerve to look me in the eye,” he said. “We could’ve come to some kind of arrangement.”

“About the tuition,” Janet added quickly. “It’s expensive.”

Tim didn’t believe for one second that this had anything to do with his tuition. Thankfully, Lillian also wasn’t fooled.

“If you’re that concerned about the expense, I can relay a message on your behalf, and Mr. Wayne may be in contact,” she told Jack coolly. “But that’s not what today is about, Mr. Drake.”

“No. No, you’re right,” said Jack, but he was only getting more belligerent. Tim wanted to sink into the couch cushions and never emerge. “Today’s about how he got his damn butler to drop my son off in the bad part of town instead of meeting us at his house five minutes down the road. What was he doing that was so important? Was there a village missing its idiot, or what?”

“Jack!” Janet scolded, but Lillian overrode even her.

“Mr. Drake, may I remind you that disparaging remarks about our foster parents will not be tolerated,” she said, firmly and clearly. “I *will* have security escort you off the premises if you—”

“We’re done here anyway,” Jack retorted. He got to his feet in one swift move and yanked his briefcase off the table. The puzzle cube fell to the floor again, hitting the carpet with a slight clatter. Jack strode across the room without another word, without looking back.

Janet exhaled a long breath through her nose. “I apologize on his behalf,” she said to Lillian. “This entire ordeal has been incredibly stressful for him. He’s just not himself these days.”

Lillian nodded but didn’t say a word. It felt like she was waiting for something. Tim couldn’t imagine what.

“I’d better get after him,” Janet said after an awkward moment. She pushed herself off the couch. Tim did the same, and they met just to the side of the coffee table. She smiled and brushed his hair back again.

“Now, you be good for Mr. Wayne, Timothy,” she told him. “Hopefully, we’ll see you again real soon. Okay?”

“Okay,” said Tim. His mother smiled and hugged him, tighter than before. Tim closed his eyes and breathed in her familiar scent, but too soon, she was pulling back, and then she was leaving.

Tim’s eyes were stinging, and the open doorway was getting blurry, but he didn’t look away until Lillian said his name.

“Sorry,” he said to her. “I guess I should go, too.”

“You can stay as long as you like, Tim,” said Lillian. Her voice was so gentle. “Would you like to sit back down? Drink some water?”

“Oh. Okay,” said Tim.

He felt rather numb. His abandoned glass was still full, the water now room temperature, but he swallowed a few mouthfuls mechanically before setting it back down on the coffee table and sitting on the couch again.

“Do you want to talk about what just happened?” asked Lillian.

Tim thought about it. What was there to talk about, really? His dad had made a scene, and his mom had— well. His vision was blurring again.

“They didn’t know it was my birthday,” he said. It sounded like an excuse, but it wasn’t. It was just a fact.

“Yeah,” said Lillian with a sigh. “I’m sorry.”

She said more, but Tim didn’t listen. He wrapped his arms around his middle, but it didn’t help with the hollow feeling in his gut. He didn’t

know why this was bothering him so much; it wasn't like his parents forgetting his birthday or causing a scene was anything new. In fact, it was pretty normal. They always forgot. He always reminded them. It was like permission slips, and doctor's notes, and money on his lunch card. They forgot. He took care of it. Without him around, it really wasn't all that surprising that stuff was falling through the cracks.

"Do you want Dick to come and sit with you for a little while?" Lillian asked.

Tim didn't know if he wanted that or not. He knew he didn't want to bother Dick, but Dick had said he'd hang around in case Tim needed anything. Did Tim *need* something, though? Other than a ride back to the manor, of course.

"I— maybe?" he managed, and Lillian nodded.

"One sec," she said. She got up off the couch and poked her head out into the hall. Tim heard her tell someone something in a quiet voice, and then she came back. She picked the puzzle cube up off the floor on her way and set it on the arm of the sofa next to Tim.

When Dick entered the room a minute later, Tim noticed his worried expression with a rush of guilt. He opened his mouth to explain that it wasn't that serious, and say that he shouldn't have bothered him, but before the words could come out, Dick crossed the room. He pulled Tim to his feet and straight into a hug.

It couldn't have been more different than the hugs his mother had just given him. Dick's hold was tight but not oppressive. And he didn't let go after just a few seconds. There was no sense of urgency, no agenda. And when Tim accidentally let out a little sob—so quiet that even he barely heard it—Dick rubbed his back the way his mother never would. She hated it when he cried. Both his parents did.

Tim's tears eventually petered out, and he shifted a little. Dick loosened his hold at once, but gestured to the couch. They sat together. Lillian, Tim noticed, had disappeared, and, for the first time, the door to the room was closed— not all the way, but enough to give them a little privacy.

"You okay?" asked Dick, with the look of someone who already knew the answer was no.

But Tim nodded anyway and reached for his glass of water. After a sip, he said, "Thanks."

“Any time, Timmy,” said Dick. Tim looked over in surprise, and Dick frowned. “Sorry,” he added. “I don’t why I said that. Do people even call you Timmy?”

“Not since I was really little,” Tim said. He smiled before Dick could apologize again. “I don’t mind if you do.”

You did before, he added silently. Someday, maybe, he’d tell Dick about that.

“Okay,” Dick said, and Tim left it at that for now.

They stayed there in silence for a long moment, then a new thought occurred to him. “They didn’t see you, they?”

“Your parents?” Dick guessed. “Yeah, they saw me. Didn’t recognize me, though.”

“Oh. Good,” said Tim, relieved. But he was curious. “Why didn’t they recognize you?”

Dick shrugged. “Probably because I haven’t been to one of Bruce’s parties since I was, like, fourteen. Nobody from that world recognizes me anymore.”

“You’re not missing much,” Tim said, more bitter than he intended. “It sucks.”

Dick chuckled. “Yeah. It does.”

“I think my dad hates Bruce,” Tim said after a pause.

Dick nodded. “He gets that a lot.”

Tim chuckled, but sobered quickly. “I think he was hoping Bruce would be here today, so he could... I don’t even know. Start a fight or something.”

“Good luck with that one,” Dick scoffed.

Was that—? There was no way Dick just said that.

“Bruce has an army of lawyers,” he went on.

That made more sense: Dick was talking about a *legal* fight. Not that it made much difference— Bruce tended to win those, too. But what kind of fight could Jack give him? Tim supposed he could use Bruce’s

playboy reputation to try to make a case that Bruce was unfit to look after his son, but that was an uphill battle, especially because Jack didn't have a leg to stand on. He wasn't exactly fit to be Tim's parent either.

But Tim was tired of thinking about this. He shifted on the couch cushion. Thankfully, Dick took the hint.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Tim. He picked up the puzzle cube from the coffee table and made his way back to the shelf where he'd found it.

"You can keep that if you like," said Lillian's voice from behind him. He turned and found her just inside the now wide open door. Dick must have opened it.

"Won't someone else want it?" Tim asked her. Lillian shrugged.

"You're the only kid I've seen who took an interest in it for more than three seconds," she said. "And you've solved more of it than any of us have. We pass it around the break room on slow days," she explained with a smile. "Seriously, Tim. Take it. Call it a birthday present."

Tim's face was warm again, but he looked down at the puzzle cube and nodded. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Lillian replied, and she started to walk them back out to the lobby. "I'm sorry today didn't go as well as we'd hoped. Maybe next time will be better."

"Maybe," Tim said, though he doubted there'd be a next time, despite what his mother had said. And if there was, he doubted it would be better.

"Take care, Tim," Lillian added, at the door. "We'll be in touch."

"Yeah," said Tim. "Bye, Lillian."

Dick waved, and they headed across the lobby and out into the parking lot. Dick unlocked his car, and they both climbed inside, but he didn't start the engine right away. Tim watched him with narrowed eyes, wondering what kind of conversation they were about to have now that they were truly alone.

But Dick just smiled and said, "Do you want to go straight back to the

manor, or...?"

"Or?" Tim repeated with some trepidation.

"Or... I could go for a milkshake. Do you wanna get a milkshake?"

A weight lifted off Tim's chest. He smiled. "Yeah," he said. "Milkshake sounds good."

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter, Tim has a visit with his parents. Neither of them remember that it is Tim's birthday. His mother is slightly passive aggressive in their very first interaction, and his father is curt.

They sit in awkward silence, and his father sighs in a frustrated, impatient way. Tim feels anger because his parents seemingly can't even make the effort to start a conversation. He ends up doing it for them, and they have a relatively pleasant conversation until his father barks at him to stop fidgeting. Once Tim puts away the puzzle he'd been fiddling with, Jack apologizes to Janet for interrupting, but not to Tim.

Towards the end of the conversation, Jack brings up the fact that Tim is returning to Gotham Academy. The cost of the tuition (and the fact that it is being paid by Bruce Wayne) seems to anger Jack. Lillian defuses the situation somewhat, but then Jack has an outburst about how Bruce 'had his butler' drive Tim downtown to the office rather than letting them visit Tim at Wayne Manor. (This was Tim's decision, not Bruce's, and Dick drove him, not Alfred.) Jack insults Bruce, calling him an idiot, and when Lillian calls him out for it, Jack storms out of the room. Janet apologizes to Lillian, but not to Tim. She gives Tim a quick hug and leaves.

...I know all that sounds really bad as well (I'm two for two here!) but before this part, Tim bonds with Dick about video games, and after this part, Dick gives him a really big hug, lets him cry on his shoulder, and takes him out to get a milkshake.

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

> In which Alfred is nostalgic, Dick makes a mistake, and Bruce manages to surprise Tim for once.
>
> *“They forgot my birthday,” Tim said. “And my dad’s really mad at you. Lillian will probably talk to you about that.”*
>
> *Bruce had a familiar but strange feeling like he was in a fight—sidestepping a blow and shifting his weight, trying to regain the advantage.*

Chapter Notes

> Hello, gentle readers!
>
> Thank you all for being here, it means so much to see you enjoying my story. I just wanted to let you know that I will be taking another break to build up some more chapters before I start posting again. I’m giving myself four weeks, which means I’ll return around the beginning of June. I’ll make sure to share updates on my Tumblr, so if you follow me there, you can expect some news, and maybe even a sneak peek at what’s coming up next.
>
> Thank you for your patience and understanding, and I hope to see you again soon!
>
> —MrsD.

Alfred ran the duster along the top of the frame, then down each of the sides. He gave the bottom a cursory swipe as well. There was not much dust there, and no one would notice if there were.

Well. *He* would. And the cleaning staff would. They dusted these frames once a month, on the third Monday, which was only a few days away. Alfred could have left it to them. Arguably, he *should* have left it to them. But no matter. He’d been in the hall for nearly thirty minutes now, listening to Bruce work and waiting for news, so he thought he may as well be useful.

He traced the inner edges of the frame and swiped the faint layer of dust from the glass. On the other side, Thomas and Martha were

young and beautiful and very much in love as they had every right to be on their wedding day. Alfred smiled. He hadn't been there, but he'd heard so much about it that he could practically narrate the day from memory. He often wondered if Bruce would like to hear about it... but he worried that if he voiced those stories, then he'd lose the excited duet that still played in his head whenever he looked at these old photographs.

"You see, the cake had edible flowers—"

"Not that they tasted edible."

"—but nobody told the florist's assistant that, and she actually thought that the caterer had dismantled one of her bouquets to decorate it. I have no idea why *she thought that, but—"*

"They'd been feuding for years, don't you remember? Something about a jilted lover, if I recall correctly."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. Why do I remember this and you don't, Martha?"

"You've always loved the gossip far more than you let on. Nosy parker."

"Guilty."

"In any case, it was a whole to-do. They very nearly came to blows in the kitchen. Can you imagine?"

"Weddings make everyone a bit batty, darling."

From across the hall, there came the sound of the drill. Then a metallic clatter—no doubt a screw hitting the floor and rolling—then muttered profanity. Alfred tensed, waiting to see if he'd be called upon to help, but Bruce just sighed, and the drill started up again a second later. Alfred moved on to the next frame.

It was much larger. It had to be, as it showed the massive wedding party in its entirety rather than just the bride and groom. Martha had once confided in Alfred that she regretted having such a big wedding, especially since, only a few years later, she'd lost touch with four of her eight bridesmaids, and Thomas was only ever really close with two of his groomsmen— his soon-to-be brother-in-law and Roger Elliot, of course.

From inside the guest master suite, Bruce swore again.

The next set of photos in the wedding series included candid shots of the guests. Not knowing most of the attendees, Alfred had never paid them much attention, so he dusted them quickly and moved on, eager to get to the baby pictures down the hall. Then a thought occurred to him, and he turned back.

He knew he wouldn't recognize them, even if they had been present and had been photographed. But he couldn't help but wonder: was anyone from the Drake family present at the wedding? Or the Brodericks? Alfred was fairly certain that was Janet's name before she was married. The Wayne wedding would have been the event of the season; if either of Tim's parents had been born and raised in Gotham's upper echelons, then *their* parents almost certainly would have attended the wedding. Perhaps they even knew Thomas or Martha— likely peripherally, the way Bruce knew Jack and Janet.

Alfred scanned every image and every face, though he knew it was futile. Prior to meeting Tim, he had paid little attention to their closest neighbours. He knew that they'd gone to the same galas; they'd even been to Wayne Manor. But Alfred wouldn't have been able to identify either of them without Bruce showing him a picture. So there was no possible way that he would recognize Tim's grandparents in these old photographs.

Still. He found he couldn't quite look away from all the smiling, elegantly dressed people. How vapid they all seemed. Too wealthy to have even one toe in reality. How much damage were they leaving in their wake? How much were they hurting their families, their children, while they themselves remained oblivious?

...It was possible that Alfred was tad emotionally invested.

He moved on down the hall, from wedding to honeymoon to baby belly to baby pictures. Alfred himself started appearing, alarmingly young and stiffly poised in the background. Until— there it was. Alfred's favourite photograph.

Thomas had taken it. Alfred hadn't known he was there until he heard the shutter click. How embarrassed Alfred had been when he first turned around, but how grateful he was now, that his dear old friend had had his camera that day.

That was his boy, Alfred thought, wiping the glass over Bruce's young face again though the dust was already gone. That was his boy, and

Martha's boy, and Thomas'. And Alfred simply could not imagine a universe where any one of them would choose to leave him behind.

"Feeling nostalgic?" said Bruce from behind him.

Only long experience kept Alfred from starting in surprise. He sniffed, checked his reflection in the glass, and straightened his shoulders before turning around.

"Any word?" he asked, not answering the question.

Bruce nodded. "Dick said the Drakes just left, so they should be on their way home soon."

"Very good," said Alfred. "And how goes the battle?" he asked, gesturing to the room down the hall.

"Nearly done," Bruce replied. "Just have to stock the shelves. Do you think—" His phone buzzed his hand again, interrupting him before he could finish the question.

"What is it?" Alfred asked, because Bruce's relaxed expression vanished the second his eyes dropped to the screen.

"Aftermath. Stand by," he read aloud. He closed his eyes briefly and blew out a breath. "Dammit."

Alfred felt a pang of sympathy for all of his boys. For Bruce, who'd been hurt but hadn't shown it when Tim asked Dick to take him today instead. For Dick, who was now dealing with whatever fallout had come from Tim's first encounter with his parents in almost a year. And for Tim himself, of course, who had quickly gone from *the neighbour boy* to part of the family.

"I'm sure Master Dick has the situation well in hand," he reminded Bruce.

"I know he does," Bruce said. "I just..."

"You would rather be there yourself."

"Yes," Bruce admitted, after a lengthy pause.

Alfred smiled, but it was small and sad. And guilty. Bruce was getting better at saying things like this— admissions of vulnerability, however tiny, were less rare these days than they used to be. But Alfred also knew the reason for that, and it had everything to do with his other

boy. The one they'd lost. The one it hurt too much to talk about. The one it hurt too much to think about, so he didn't. Not nearly as much as Jason deserved, anyway.

They stood in silence for a moment. Alfred turned away, and his eyes landed on his favourite photograph once more. In it, Bruce was tiny. Barely out of diapers, in fact. He'd fallen in love with stories and was going through a fairy tale phase. Every game of make-believe he engaged in featured knights and princes and towers and dragons.

"I love this picture," Alfred said aloud, stepping towards it.

"So you *are* feeling nostalgic," Bruce replied. Alfred could hear the faint smile in his voice.

"Suppose I am," Alfred agreed.

After a moment, Bruce came to stand beside him. "Mother made that for me, didn't she?"

Alfred nodded and touched the corner of the frame. He remembered the hours that Martha spent wrestling that green and purple fabric through her sewing machine. But the outcome was well worth it. The hood had spiny ridges that ran all along the back, right to the end of the stuffed tail. Wings sprouted from the shoulders, and the ends of the pant legs had clawed feet lined with elastic to stretch over Bruce's shoes. Alfred remembered how Bruce cried when those pants grew too short, and Martha had to remove the shoe covers so he could still wear the rest of it.

In this photo, however, it fit perfectly. Alfred could still hear the swish of the fabric as Bruce spun, the soft *thwack* of the stuffed tail hitting his legs, and his laugh as he practically fell down from dizziness.

But Alfred's favourite part of this picture wasn't the costume. It was the heap of wadded orange tissue paper littering the grass around himself and Bruce. Alfred's smile widened, remembering Bruce's imitation of a dragon's shriek as he threw each 'fireball'. Alfred dodged and deflected most of them, letting them bounce harmlessly off his tinfoil-coated cardboard shield.

"And you made that for me," he said, pointing to the shield.

"I did?"

Alfred nodded, thinking of cut-up boxes and glitter spread across the

table. Martha wouldn't let him in the kitchen for an entire afternoon, and he only knew why when Bruce proudly presented him with the shield afterwards.

"I didn't make one for myself, too?"

Alfred shook his head. "You were always the dragon."

Bruce chuckled. "Well, of course. I looked the part."

"No," said Alfred. "Your mother made that costume for you *because* you always wanted to be the dragon. Even after you outgrew it, you still put yourself in that role."

"Hm," said Bruce with a frown that was thoughtful rather than sad. Alfred smiled faintly.

"I know it's hard to imagine," he went on, deliberately facetious. *"You* wanting to present yourself as a large, fearsome creature. Boggles the mind."

"Okay," said Bruce, in that flat tone that meant that he was amused but didn't want to show it. Alfred laughed.

Before he could say anything more, Bruce's phone buzzed again. He looked down to read the message, and the tense line of his shoulders relaxed somewhat.

"They're on their way?" Alfred guessed. Bruce shook his head, smiling slightly.

"Milkshakes," he said.

"Ah," said Alfred, understanding at once. He remembered the times he got a message like that— after a hard day at school, or as a (rather ironic) reward for a visit to the dentist. And later, on summer nights, the single-word update would come in Batman's gruff tone over the comm. It was a different sort of shield, one that Bruce had made for Dick and Jason, and now Dick was sharing it with Tim.

"It'll be alright, Master Bruce," Alfred said. The platitude would have felt empty had he said it a few minutes ago, but, after a milkshake, it seemed more plausible.

Bruce seemed to agree, nodding as he tucked his phone into his pocket. He glanced back in the direction of the guest master suite, and

Alfred raised his duster again.

Without another word, they both went back to work.

It started with the puzzle cube.

Well, actually, it started on Thursday afternoon, when Janet Drake called CPS to request a supervised visit with Tim. It started with Bruce walking through the doors of the library Thursday evening and practically colliding head-on with Tim's Spanish teacher. It started with the worst dissociative episode that Bruce had ever seen—definitely in Tim, possibly in anyone. It started with Tim spending most of yesterday outside; only the lack of perimeter alarms let Bruce know that he'd stayed on the property. It started with near-total silence—speaking only when spoken to—and jumping at the slightest sound, then giving out fake smiles when someone asked if he was okay.

(In other words, it started a long time ago, with whatever the fuck was going on down the road at Drake Manor.)

But tonight, it started with the puzzle cube.

Tim had returned from the CPS office with it— a birthday present from Lillian, apparently, which Bruce thought was a kind gesture, especially since Tim didn't return with so much as a card from his parents. Bruce made a mental note to thank her in their next correspondence, which he imagined would be coming very soon.

Tim had fiddled with the cube all afternoon, only putting it down at the dinner table. When they went to the den to watch a movie afterwards, Bruce heard its clicking start up again. He tuned it out after a minute or two, and tuned the movie out a few minutes after that. It was easy enough— the film was a cheesy murder-mystery comedy, exactly the kind of thing that Dick loved to watch because it let him turn his brain off. Bruce decided to use the time to sort through his perpetually-overflowing WE inbox on his tablet.

But movement on the couch about halfway through the movie had drawn his attention, and he'd looked up to see Dick reach over to place his hand on Tim's puzzle cube, stilling his fingers and silencing the clicking.

"Sorry," Dick said softly. "It's just kinda loud, you know?"

Tim's posture went rigid. It was a signal, as subtle as an air raid siren, that something was wrong. Bruce didn't know what yet, but he could tell that Dick hadn't noticed. His eyes had stayed focused on the screen, his body language relaxed and easy. The two of them beside each other, it was like a man lounging next to a statue that was silently screaming. Bruce waited, practically holding his breath, to see if Tim would come out of it on his own, but when nearly a full minute passed without Tim so much as blinking, he decided to intervene.

He set his tablet aside and got to his feet. Dick and Alfred both glanced up in surprise. Tim didn't, but his shoulders came down a little, at least.

"I think we need snacks," Bruce declared. "Tim, you want to help me get something from the kitchen?"

There was the jump that Bruce had been expecting. It was followed a second later by that heartbreakingly familiar fake smile.

"Sure," Tim said, and he began extracting himself from the sofa.

"Want me to pause it?" Dick asked, reaching for the remote.

"No, that's okay," said Bruce, at the same time that Tim said, "I already know who the killer is."

"Oh," said Dick, surprised but recovering quickly. "Online spoilers?"

Tim shook his head. "It's obvious. It was the—"

Dick made a sputtering noise, and Tim stopped talking. Bruce was relieved to see his smile turn into something more real. He even laughed a little.

"Come on," Bruce said to him. "I think I know who did it, too. Let's compare notes in the kitchen."

"Do you require my assistance?" Alfred asked.

"I know how to open a bag of chips, Alfred," Bruce said. He rolled his eyes at the skeptical noise that Alfred made as they left the den.

"I think we have three kinds to choose from," he said when they entered the kitchen. He pointed to the pantry while he went to get the big bowl from the cupboard over the fridge. "You go ahead and pick whichever you like, Tim."

Tim was still standing in front of the open pantry by the time Bruce brought the bowl to the kitchen island, and Bruce realized his mistake. He set the bowl down and went to stand at Tim's side. He moved slowly and loudly, and tried to edge himself into Tim's peripheral vision, so Tim wouldn't be startled when he spoke.

"We all like these kinds," he said. "There's no wrong answer here, I promise."

That got Tim's attention. He turned his head slightly, meeting Bruce's eyes once before dropping his gaze. It was fast, but not so fast that Bruce missed the distrust in his expression. Silently, Bruce cursed Jack and Janet— for doing this to their kid at all, of course, but also for barging in today, on Tim's birthday of all days, and upsetting the fragile balance they were just starting to achieve.

"Hey," he said softly. "You wanna talk about it?"

"About... chips?" Tim said, sounding almost hopeful.

"Sure," Bruce chuckled. More seriously, he added, "We can talk about anything you want, bud."

Tim turned back to the pantry. He reached out and touched one of the bags, moving it around slightly. "My dad hates it when I fidget," he said after a long moment.

It started with the puzzle cube, Bruce thought again. Out loud, he said, "Dick doesn't. I don't, and neither does Alfred."

"I know," said Tim. "I know he didn't mean anything by it."

"But it was similar enough that it reminded you," Bruce guessed.

Tim nodded, but stayed silent.

"Do you want to talk about seeing your parents today?" Bruce asked.

He tried not to get his hopes up, reminding himself that the answer was probably no. But Tim, as ever, seemed hellbent on surprising him.

"They forgot my birthday," he said. "And my dad's really mad at you. Lillian will probably talk to you about that."

"Okay," said Bruce. He had a familiar but strange feeling like he was in a fight— sidestepping a blow and shifting his weight, trying to regain the advantage. "I'm sorry they forgot your birthday, Tim," he

said once he'd recovered. "That's really shitty."

Tim sent him an expectant look, and Bruce nodded. "I'll pay up when I'm done," he promised, which had the intended effect of making Tim smile. "Because it's worse than shitty if your dad took his feelings for me out on you today. I'm sorry that happened."

Tim turned back to the chips, but he ducked his head, not even pretending to look at them anymore. "My dad hates you," he admitted.

It took a conscious effort for Bruce not to retort that he'd never been very fond of Jack, either. The anger burned surprisingly hot in his chest, and he made himself take a breath before speaking.

"He's allowed to hate me," he said. "I was kind of expecting it, to be honest."

Tim raised his head. "Really?"

Bruce nodded. He took a few steps back towards the kitchen island and cocked his head for Tim to follow. He did, after a moment, and they sat side-by-side on two of the high stools.

"Your parents and I run in the same social circles," Bruce explained. "I'm not surprised that they found out you were living here, and I'm not surprised that they're upset. Hurt feelings are common in situations like this. But what shouldn't be common is for them to take those hurt feelings out on you."

"They didn't mean to," said Tim.

Bruce smiled faintly, because he'd been expecting this, too. It was natural that Tim would defend his parents, despite everything.

"Even if they didn't mean to," he said carefully, "it's not acceptable that they did. If your father has a problem with me, that's one thing. But it's not fair for you to get caught in the middle."

"I'm not worried about me," Tim corrected him swiftly. Again: surprising. "But you and Lillian, *that's* what's not fair. You're just trying to help, and Lillian's just doing her job."

And you're just a kid, Bruce wanted to say, but his instincts told him that that wouldn't go over well. Tim was fifteen going on forty.

“Still,” Bruce said, “I’m sorry you’re going through this, Tim.”

Tim nodded, then shrugged. Bruce waited to see if he would say anything else, but it seemed like he was done for now. He looked miserable, though, and Bruce wasn’t sure that watching the rest of the movie in the other room—or even talking about how the killer was definitely that redhead who’d appeared in the first five minutes—would cheer him up.

But maybe something else would do the trick.

“Come with me for a sec,” Bruce said, dropping down off the stool. “I want to show you something.”

Tim hesitated, but he did follow. Bruce led them out the other kitchen door, the one that led through the dining room they hadn’t used since Tim’s first night at the manor. From there, they went past the front staircase and down a short hallway that led to the seldom-visited guest master suite.

Well, until a few days ago, it was seldom-visited. Contractors had been in to re-do the floor last week, and the electrician was there a few days ago to rig up the new lights. Bruce himself had spent most of the afternoon in there, installing new window blinds and stocking the shelves, while Alfred dusted the pictures that lined the hallway.

“You weren’t supposed to see this until tomorrow,” he said, when they reached the closed door. “But it’s a birthday present, and today is your birthday, so...”

Tim didn’t say anything, didn’t guess at what was behind the door. There was a complicated look on his face that kept changing— from hope to confusion to fear and back around to hope again. Bruce spared him another moment of apprehension and opened the door.

The blinds and black-out curtains were open, so the room was faintly lit with the last traces of summer daylight. Still, Bruce reached for one of the two light switches just inside the door, illuminating the larger light fixture on the ceiling.

The room had been completely transformed from what it used to be. The plush carpet was gone, replaced by durable, waterproof laminate. No bedroom furniture remained; even the closet organizer looked more like something found in a doctor’s office, with white shelves and cupboard doors— all neatly labelled, of course. A lab bench lined the wall closest to the ensuite bathroom. Above it hung a wire, about a

foot from the wall. Most of the rest of the floor was taken up by a second lab bench, but the front right corner was set up like a miniature living room, with a lamp, a coffee table, and cozy chair.

Tim took two steps into the room, his mouth agape, and spun in a slow circle. Bruce suppressed a smile—good to know Tim wasn't the only one capable of surprises—and let him soak it in. Tim's eyes travelled from the benches to the wire to the curtains and blinds to the second light fixture and its vivid red bulb.

"This... is a darkroom," Tim said finally. "You have a darkroom in your house."

Bruce nodded cautiously, hesitant to tell him that, until a week and a half ago, he didn't. Maybe this was too much, he thought, not for the first time. Alfred *had* warned him.

Too late now, he decided. He swallowed and said, "It's yours."

Tim blinked. His mouth fell open again. "I— wha— seriously?"

"Yeah," said Bruce, letting himself smile at last. "Seriously. Happy birthday."

"I— thank you," Tim stammered. "But I— I don't have a film camera anymore."

"I wouldn't worry about that," Bruce advised, and he watched as Tim understood.

"I... don't know what to say," he said after a moment.

Bruce didn't need him to say anything. "Let me show you around," he offered, gesturing for Tim to follow. "Changing bag, trays, gloves, photographic paper— all in the closet. Bathroom's over there, so you can get water and wash up. There's a safelight in there, too, so you don't have to worry about keeping the door closed."

"Oh, cool," said Tim with some surprise. He wandered over to the bench and touched the smooth white surface. His fingers brushed the hanging wire and the container of mini-clothespins, too. Then he turned back towards the closet.

"Chemicals are stored there," Bruce explained, pointing to the white cupboard door marked with the proper hazard symbols. "It's locked," he added, when Tim reached for the handle. "But once we have a

chance to go over the storage rules, I'll give you a copy of the key. The other one's going to stay in the kitchen in case of emergency."

"Okay," said Tim, but he seemed a bit put out by this, and Bruce could guess why.

"I know you had a darkroom before, so you probably know what you're doing," he said delicately. "And it's not that I don't trust you, or don't think you're capable, it's just that these are dangerous chemicals, and I want to make sure you're as safe as you can be."

"Okay," Tim said again, and this time he was smiling. Bruce smiled back, relieved.

"And this," he concluded, waving his arm towards the cozy corner. "I thought about setting this space up like a studio, but it seems like you mostly take outdoor shots?"

Tim reacted to that with a somewhat startled look, but then he nodded.

"So I thought this could be a... getaway space. For you," Bruce went on, feeling a little awkward. "Somewhere that's not your room and not outside, and not somewhere that Alfred, Dick, or I will be hanging out. Unless you invite us in. Obviously."

Tim blinked once, then three more times in quick succession. Then he turned away, moving back towards one of the lab benches. "Thank you," he said again, so quiet that Bruce almost missed it.

"You're welcome," said Bruce, touched by his reaction.

Before either of them could say more, there was a knock on the wooden doorframe. "Hey," Dick said when Bruce looked over. "Thought you guys were getting snacks, but here you are spoiling Timmy's birthday surprise."

Bruce smiled and shrugged, and Dick came fully into the room. "It looks amazing," he said. "What do you think?" he asked Tim.

"It's... yeah, amazing," said Tim, though he was focused on the enlarger and didn't look their way.

Bruce wandered towards the door while Dick asked Tim what, exactly, the enlarger did. He lingered in the hall a moment, listening to Tim's explanation, then finally went back to the kitchen to finish getting the

snacks for his boys.

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

> Tim lies to Batman. Alfred draws some conclusions.
>
> *Short of bribing someone to be an eyewitness for him or somehow altering the theatre's security footage, Tim had done about all he could to build a credible alibi.*

Chapter Notes

> Hello everyone, I have missed you! Apologies for my longer-than-intended break. I had to travel in May for a funeral, so writing kind of took a backseat for a few weeks. Just a heads-up that I will be posting every other week instead of every week for a little while, as I continue to write new chapters. I wasn't going to start posting again until I had six chapters finished and I only have four and a half right now, but I'm eager to share what I have. I hope you like it!

It was too much. Everything was just... too much.

The darkroom, the digital camera from Dick, and the old film camera that Alfred said used to belong to Bruce's dad?!

All of it was so nice, way nicer than any birthday gift he'd received *ever*.

But also. Too much.

Tim grabbed the movie ticket from the dispenser and doubled back towards the entrance. Thank goodness Alfred had believed him when he said Pat would meet him inside. Thank goodness Alfred didn't insist on waiting until Pat arrived. Thank goodness Alfred didn't want to meet Pat in person. (Tim couldn't shake the feeling that Bruce would have insisted on that.)

A quick glance out the front doors confirmed that the black Rolls Royce was gone. Tim had figured it would be. He'd gone to the bathroom before he even bought his ticket, just to waste some time. By his calculations, Alfred should be almost to the bridge by now, well on his way back to the manor. Still, Tim waited a little longer, pretending to text someone, just in case.

He felt a little guilty—okay, he felt *a lot* guilty—because Bruce had given him a crisp fifty-dollar bill on the way out tonight, so he'd have money left over for popcorn, and enough to get some for Pat if Pat couldn't afford it. Tim had told Bruce he was happy to spend part of his allowance on the night out, because that was what allowances were for, but Bruce had insisted. Even cognitively knowing that fifty dollars was more like fifty cents to someone with as much money as Bruce Wayne, Tim's conscience was still eating at him.

It was bad enough that Bruce was now paying his phone bill— Alfred had seemed a little shocked when Tim told him he'd been paying it on his own since he was ten. The upcoming tuition bill was on Tim's mind as well (especially because it was on his parents' minds), but this movie night was literally a waste of Bruce's money. Tim wasn't even going to see the movie.

He supposed he could have just not bothered to buy a ticket, but what if Bruce asked to see it, as proof that Tim had been where he said he'd been? Tim had, of course, researched the movie thoroughly and read all the spoilers. He'd even imagined some conversations with Pat about it, to get a feel for what he'd say if Bruce asked him what Pat thought. (Pat loved it, but thought the romantic subplot was pointless and dumb. Tim disagreed, and Pat called him a softie for it.) Short of bribing someone to be an eyewitness for him or somehow altering the theatre's security footage, Tim had done about all he could to build a credible alibi.

...Maybe he should just stay here and watch the movie. He could say that Pat texted at the last minute and couldn't come. That was almost not even a lie. And the movie might be just as good as—

No. He knew it wouldn't be. As soon as he came into the city tonight, Tim had known that he would accept no substitutes. It was one of those nights.

He shoved the ticket in his pocket and left the theatre, weaving his way seamlessly through the crowd of people who were heading inside for the 7:45 show on discount night. He kept his head down, his hands tight on his backpack straps, and his eyes open— and not just for signs of Alfred. Gotham was Gotham, after all.

Thankfully, the alley was deserted. After a hot sunny day, it stank, of course, but even that felt familiar and almost welcome. Tim held his breath as he passed within twenty feet of an overflowing dumpster. He turned one corner, then another, and finally he found himself

exactly where he wanted to be: in front of a clothing donation bin tall enough to reach the dangling ladder of a fire escape. Someday, maybe, the city would get its act together and fix some of these, but until that day, they were the best friend of anybody who wanted to get on a roof and didn't have access to a grapnel gun.

After a quick look around to make sure he was alone, Tim slid his backpack down one shoulder and opened it as narrowly as possible so that if anyone was looking, they wouldn't see his ridiculously expensive camera equipment and decide he was a good target. He reached in and felt around for his fingerless gloves. They were expensive, too. They used to be his father's. Tim found them in the closet one day and banked on his dad not noticing if they went missing. (So far, it'd worked out.)

He slid them on and re-zipped his backpack before securing it on his back and heading for the clothing donation bin. Climbing up felt normal and easy in a way that few things in Tim's life had ever been. Hoisting himself on the ladder went smoother than ever and within seconds he was climbing the stairs. He went slowly, partly because he wanted to move quietly and partly because there was rust, and he wanted to be able to catch himself if one of the steps gave way. He kept back from the windows, too. He didn't want anyone calling the cops.

Finally, after four sets of stairs, he was on the roof, and, for the first time in days—weeks?—he felt like he could breathe. He took a deep breath of the city-scented summer air: fresh tarmac, car exhaust, and garbage, of course. But he also caught a whiff of street vendor hot dogs that never tasted as good as they smelled, and traces of the sharp contrast between sun-warmed concrete and the perpetually cold waters of Gotham Bay.

In other words, it was perfect.

He stood at the edge of the roof for a long moment, letting his mind go blessedly quiet as he soaked in the sounds of the city, from the thumping bass of passing cars to far-off foghorns and occasional sirens. He lowered himself to the edge and let his feet dangle. The unused movie ticket crinkled in his pocket, so he reached in and fished it out. He re-read the title, then tore the bottom off the way the staff would have if he'd actually gone inside. He watched the slip of white paper flutter down to the street below until it was out of sight.

He moved to the shade of the narrow roof access, where the roof was

slightly cooler. He leaned back and smiled up at the still-blue sky, crowded in on all sides by taller buildings. He wondered if anyone in those hundreds of windows was looking down while he was looking up, but it wasn't something he cared to worry about at the moment. For all the planning it had taken to get out of the manor, to get downtown, to get free, now that he was here, the only thing he wanted to do was relax. He had hours, after all— Alfred wasn't coming back to the theatre to pick him up until 10:30. He could go anywhere, really, as long as he was back at the theatre in time. But he didn't think he was going to leave this roof. He didn't need to. He had everything he needed right here.

After a long moment of doing nothing but listening to the city, Tim opened his bag again and pulled out his new camera. He was eager to test it on something that moved faster than the sun, of course, but he'd take what he could get. He played with every setting, every lens, every filter, snapping dozens of pictures as the light changed around him and the sun started to sink in earnest. The task required his complete focus. He lost himself in it, and he was happy.

Finally, when it was starting to get dark—real-dark, not summer-twilight-dark—he decided to pack it in. Police sirens had taken over the general soundscape of the streets, and the cool breeze that had been so refreshing when he first climbed up here was starting to get chilly. According to his phone, it was 10:03. He had plenty of time to get back to the theatre and hang out in the foyer to wait for Alfred.

He shouldered his backpack and began to make his way carefully towards the top of the fire escape. He paused for one more look—

—and had to get his camera out again because that was the frickin' Bat-Signal.

He took a few steps back from the edge and re-opened his backpack, feeling around inside it blindly, unwilling to take his eyes off the signal in case it disappeared. It had been months since he'd seen it firsthand and never this early at night. That probably wasn't a good thing—because, well, *crime*—but he couldn't help but think that this was incredibly lucky.

He took picture after picture, putting the new camera through its paces, grinning at the results when they popped up on the display. He couldn't believe the difference. This camera was *perfect,* he could be out here all—

“Shit,” he said, because now it was 10:27.

He scrambled to get his camera and equipment stashed away, then headed for the top of the fire escape again. It was really dark now, and his vision was obstructed by the afterimage of the camera screen. He took out his phone and used its flashlight to find his way.

He climbed down the rusty fire escape as quickly as he dared. The second his feet hit the pavement, he ran through the thankfully-empty alleys to get back to the main street.

“Watch it, kid!” an older teenager yelled when Tim burst out onto the sidewalk and nearly ran directly into him. Tim called an apology over his shoulder and kept going, only slowing to a walk when he was right out front of the theatre.

He glanced at his phone—10:32—and when he raised his head again, the black Rolls Royce he’d been expecting was just pulling into a parking space. Tim lifted his hand to wave and realized he was still wearing his gloves. He swore at himself for not remembering sooner, but there was nothing he could do about it now. Even if he took them off right this minute, Alfred already saw. Tim quickly brushed the dirt and bits of rust off his palms and hoped that Alfred would just assume the gloves were some kind of fashion statement.

He took slow breaths as he walked to the car. His back was slightly damp with sweat, and his face was probably a little flushed, but it was dark. He’d probably be fine.

And even if he wasn’t, he had no time to second-guess himself now.

“Hey, Alfred,” Tim greeted him casually as he opened the rear passenger door to put his bag down on the seat. He was tempted to slide in after it—it’d be easier than sitting up front if he wanted to hide his face or take off his gloves—but he knew that would raise alarm bells.

“Master Tim,” Alfred replied simply.

His tone was impossible to read; all Tim heard was *British.* He shut the back door and opened the front.

“How was the film?” asked Alfred while Tim buckled his seatbelt.

“It was really good,” said Tim. Dammit, there was a scuff on his shoe! And roof dust along the hem of his jeans. “Surprisingly funny,

actually," he added, while he planned what he could say tomorrow that would convince Alfred to let him do his own laundry. "We liked it a lot."

"Excellent," said Alfred. He was watching for a break in the traffic and wasn't looking at Tim. After he'd taken his chance and pulled out onto the street, he asked, "I assume your... friend doesn't need a ride home?"

"No, Pat's mom left a minute before you got here," Tim lied. "With Pat, obviously," he added after a second.

Alfred didn't glance his way, but Tim thought he saw his moustache twitch. "Obviously."

What was that supposed to mean? Tim wondered. He swallowed, wishing he'd thought to use some of his movie money to buy a drink.

When Alfred didn't say anything more, Tim dove into describing the plot of the film, summarizing all the spoilers and reviews he'd read. Alfred listened and reacted like he wasn't about to bust Tim for lying. Tim figured that was a good thing.

As they drove out of town, towards the manor, Tim reminded himself that he just had to get there, and then he was free. Bruce wasn't home —idly, Tim wondered what excuse Alfred would give to explain his absence—and it was nearly 11, so as soon as they returned, Tim could go up to bed. He wouldn't have to recount these details to Bruce or show up in front of him kinda sweaty, wearing gloves that he didn't have on before.

He was almost there. They'd parked the car and were walking in through the side door. Tim was still talking, telling Alfred about the imaginary conversations he'd had with Pat about the movie.

"Clearly, you value Pat's opinion," Alfred commented. The words felt weighted somehow, but Tim couldn't ferret out his meaning.

"Yeah," he said, huffing a nervous (guilty) laugh. "I guess I do. Pat's pretty cool, you know?"

"What's pretty cool?" said a voice from the other side of the small foyer. Tim all-but jumped in surprise.

"Bruce! Hi," he said, and managed to keep it from sounding like a yelp. (He hoped.) "What are you—? I didn't see you there, sorry."

“No need to be sorry,” Bruce replied kindly. If he’d clocked Tim’s gloves, he didn’t show it. “How was the movie?”

Tim started his spiel again, hyper-aware the entire time that Bruce wasn’t in Gotham, which meant *Batman* wasn’t in Gotham, despite the GCPD lighting the Bat-Signal almost an hour ago. What the hell was he still doing here? Why had he stayed in when he was needed elsewhere? Did it have anything to do with Tim’s excursion tonight? Had he somehow known what Tim was planning? Maybe he’d arranged for Gordon to light the signal tonight as a sort of test. Maybe he wanted to see if Tim photographed it and posted it, so he’d have definitive proof, and then—

Okay, Tim stopped himself. This was getting a little paranoid, even for him.

“Anyway,” he said out loud, once the movie talk had wound down. “I think I’m gonna head up to bed. Goodnight, Bruce.”

“Goodnight, Tim,” said Bruce with a smile. Alfred, Tim noticed, had disappeared at some point. Tim hoped that was because he was bored by the repeated stories about the movie and not for any other reason.

He climbed the stairs to his room and set his backpack on the floor. He took a quick look around out of habit, but when he found that nothing had been disturbed, he breathed a sigh of relief. He stripped off his gloves and switched on the bedside lamp, then crossed the hall to the bathroom. Minutes later, he returned, teeth freshly brushed, and changed into his pyjamas. He sat on his bed and pulled his camera out of his bag.

He couldn’t help but grin as he scrolled through the pictures he’d taken. He’d have to run them through an editor, of course, to make the colours pop, but the progression was a near-perfect representation of what the city felt like as the night closed in. The light was warm, the shadows long, as the sun set. Then it faded into a cooler blue, with that strange almost-green tinge on the eastern horizon peeking out from behind the buildings. Windows got brighter as the light disappeared, and then— then, a new light, a beam projecting a symbol on the low-hanging clouds that had rolled in after Tim put his camera away the first time. If that wasn’t Gotham in four movements, Tim didn’t know what was. Maybe someday he’d enter this series in a contest— once the heat from Bruce had died down, of course.

Speaking of, Tim looked up at the sound of footsteps passing in front

of his door. He tensed, waiting for a knock, but it didn't come. The footsteps carried on down the hall to the master bedroom.

It still bothered him that Bruce wasn't out yet, that he'd been here when Tim returned. He thought again of what Bruce had said to him in the park in Metropolis—*it's my job to worry about you*—and felt a surge of guilt. Barring some vast conspiracy to catch Tim in the act (which he still wasn't fully ruling out), it seemed that Bruce had compromised one of his 'jobs' to do the other tonight, and Tim didn't like that. He'd never wanted to interfere with Batman's work; that was why he'd always stayed out of sight, watching and helping from a distance.

Part of him wished he could go back to those days, even if it would mean living alone in his parents' house again. There was a kind of freedom in that life, for all its loneliness. Maybe he could keep pursuing emancipation, and get his own place in the city, out of Bruce's hair entirely. Now that he had some money coming in, and his phone bill was taken care of, maybe he could use his savings to hire a real lawyer and make a serious go at it.

That was a decision for another day, though. For now, he set his camera down on his desk and climbed into bed. A few minutes after he turned out the lamp, he heard Bruce walk by his door in the opposite direction and descend the stairs again.

There he goes. Tim sighed in relief.

Maybe he shouldn't have snuck away tonight. Maybe he should have just gone to the movie, so Bruce wouldn't worry. But, then again, Tim had returned at the same time he would have if he'd actually gone to the movie. No matter what Tim had been doing between 7:30 and 10:30 tonight, he was out. It wasn't like he'd missed his pick-up time. So, technically, it wouldn't have made a difference whether Tim was sitting on his butt in a movie theatre or snapping pictures on a nearby rooftop.

Really, compared to the type of sneaking out that he used to do, tonight was almost normal. Kids on TV shows did it all the time—they told their parents they were going to a movie, or a sleepover, or the mall, but instead they went out with their friends to a party they weren't supposed to go to. And it wasn't like Tim was partying, or doing drugs, or even drinking.

Maybe *that* was why Bruce waited until he got home, Tim thought. He

wanted to make sure that Tim didn't smell like weed or tequila or something.

That thought made Tim feel better. Maybe the whole Batman thing had nothing to do with it. Maybe Bruce was treating Tim the same way he'd treat any other teenager living in his house. And, besides, it *would* be kind of suspicious if Bruce Wayne disappeared whenever the Bat-Signal turned on.

Still. Tim would give everything a day or two to calm down before he thought about posting a shot on his blog. He'd watch Bruce closely to make sure there were no signs that he suspected anything, then maybe he'd go to the library to use a public computer to post it, just in case.

And sometime soon, he thought vaguely, as sleep started to fall over him like a curtain, he'd actually take Pat to the movies. As a thank-you.

"No pillow in front of the door?"

The question sounded absurd in Batman's growl. Alone in the manor, Alfred gave into the age-old temptation to roll his eyes at Bruce's theatrics.

"No, sir," he replied, because of the strict rule against using real names over the comm. "I believe he is asleep."

"You're watching the hall, though, right? And the acoustic monitoring system—"

"Is up and running," Alfred finished patiently. "You have nothing to worry about here, sir. Take care of Gotham tonight."

"Right," said Batman, with just enough Bruce bleeding through to notice. "Approaching GCPD HQ now, going dark."

"Acknowledged," Alfred replied. With a click, Batman's feed went silent, and Alfred let out a long sigh.

He hadn't yet decided what he would tell Bruce, if in fact he decided to tell Bruce anything. He wasn't lying a moment ago: Bruce had worries enough outside the house. And Alfred knew Bruce had already been concerned about Tim's excursion tonight— concerned that something would happen to him (this *was* Gotham), but equally concerned that Tim wouldn't be where he was supposed to be when

Alfred arrived to pick him up. The boy had been labelled a flight risk, after all, but his disappearance in Metropolis was over a month ago now, and, with no escape attempts since, Bruce had decided that he'd earned a little trust. Alfred agreed... which was why he was hesitant to breathe a word of what he'd witnessed outside the movie theatre tonight.

He knew he should say something. Bruce would want to know. By all rights, he perhaps *deserved* to know. But Alfred had helped raise two boys to adulthood and one nearly so. He knew that sometimes they needed to keep things from their parents, as much as their parents may not like that. Besides, there wasn't much to tell. Alfred had very little evidence to go on, and most of it was what Bruce would call circumstantial. Until he knew more, broaching the subject would only lead to more worrying, and Bruce did enough of that already.

Also, Bruce had an *abysmal* track record when it came to matters of the heart— his own, or his children's. Leaving him to be the last to know was usually wise.

Alfred decided he'd ask Tim instead. Carefully, of course. It could be that he was mistaken; a few quick and seemingly innocent inquiries into Pat's interests and well-being might be enough to confirm or deny Alfred's suspicions. Given Tim's red-faced nervous chatter this evening, chances were good that he wouldn't be able to hide it. And, if Alfred was correct, then inviting Pat to dinner one night would allow Bruce to see firsthand what Alfred saw. Then Alfred wouldn't have to say a word.

He decided he also wouldn't say a word if he arrived more than two minutes late to pick Tim up the next time they went out, so Tim and Pat could have whatever private moment he'd hurried away from this evening.

Poor lad, Alfred thought fondly. How embarrassing to have a parent (or, near enough, anyway) pick him up from a date. There were several things that Alfred missed about being young, but the lack of autonomy certainly wasn't one of them.

But young love? Or, perhaps more accurately, a young crush? That was an experience that no one should be deprived of.

So, he resolved to leave it be. As long as Tim wasn't disappearing entirely or breaking curfew, what did it hurt if he wanted to sneak away with his— *hmm.* Tim hadn't referred to Pat as a boy or girl, or

used any gendered terms for Pat at all, now that he thought about it. Alfred would have to ask Pat's pronouns at dinner, then perhaps some gentle prodding could get Tim to reveal whether or not Pat was his boy/girlfriend.

Or something else entirely, of course. Who knew what the kids were calling it these days?

Batman's voice over the comm shook Alfred from his thoughts. "Finished up with Gordon. Gonna do a quick patrol in Sectors 2, 6, and 7, then heading back."

"Acknowledged," Alfred said again. "Be careful, sir."

Batman just grunted, but Alfred heard and understood perfectly.

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

> An emergency at Wayne Enterprises means Bruce has to leave Tim alone in the manor with Alfred all weekend. Tim's discovery of a certain previously-missing item gets the weekend off to a rough start.

Chapter Notes

> Just a heads-up that this is a chapter that really earns the *Grief/Mourning* tag. Please take care.

It wasn't until Tim jumped, his eyes flying to the kitchen doorway, that Bruce realized he had been moving silently again.

"Sorry," he muttered, cursing himself as he stepped fully into the room. He'd thought, in the last few weeks, that he'd managed to stop —as Alfred put it—*skulking about,* but apparently old habits died hard. Especially when he was distracted, as he was now.

"It's okay," said Tim, watching Bruce warily as he approached. He kept one hand on the top of his laptop like he was ready at any second to slam it down. He didn't, but when Bruce pulled out the chair opposite him at the table, he did close it, pushing with steady pressure until it clicked shut.

"What are you up to?" Bruce asked, in as friendly a tone as he could manage.

Tim shrugged, not quite casual enough to fool him. "Nothing. Just... talking to some friends online. What, uh, what's up with you?" he asked with obvious apprehension.

"I have to go to the office," Bruce answered immediately, not wanting to let Tim's anxiety spiral.

Tim visibly relaxed. Then he checked the time—past ten o'clock on a Friday night—and frowned in confusion.

"There's been a break-in of some kind," Bruce explained. "At one of our labs downtown."

"Oh. That sucks," said Tim. Then he shifted in his chair and asked,

“What did they take?”

Caught off-guard by the question, Bruce answered honestly. “I don’t know yet. I just got off the phone with my head of security. The police are already there, I guess it’s a big mess.”

“Must be... if they need you,” said Tim, with a strange sort of emphasis that Bruce couldn’t decipher at the moment.

He nodded instead. “I just wanted to let you know before you went to bed.”

“Oh,” Tim said again. The *why?* was implied, so Bruce went ahead and answered it.

“I’m staying in the penthouse at Wayne Tower all weekend,” he said, genuinely apologetic. “I’ll be putting in some long hours over the next few days, so it’s more convenient to just stay in the neighbourhood.”

Tim nodded, but he still looked like he trying to figure something out. Bruce had the fleeting impression that Tim thought he was lying to him.

“But if I can get away early tomorrow, I will,” he promised. “I know you and Alfred were looking forward to maybe having Pat over for dinner.”

“Oh,” said Tim, for the third time in as many minutes. “Well, it’s okay if you can’t.”

It wasn’t, really, and Bruce knew that. Alfred had been talking about inviting Pat to dinner for two weeks now, since the night Tim went to the movies, and Tim was finally—albeit cautiously—on board. He’d said he would ask Pat about it when they went to the arcade tomorrow, at least.

“Sorry,” Bruce added, but Tim shook his head.

“You don’t have to apologize,” he said. “I get it. Some things are just more important.”

The words sent a chill down Bruce’s spine. But he didn’t have even time to brush it off and respond before Tim went on.

“Like your job. Your job is really important,” he said, with that deathly serious look he sometimes got. “So, don’t worry. I’ll be fine on

my— with Alfred."

The last-second correction jabbed Bruce like a splinter in his chest. "If you need me for anything, you can call me," he said seriously. "Any time."

"I will," Tim said, but Bruce knew he was lying.

Still, he had a feeling this might be the best he could hope for under the circumstances. He put on a smile that he didn't quite feel and got to his feet. Then he hesitated, unsure of how to say goodbye.

So far, their goodnights had mostly been quick exchanges from either side of whatever room they happened to be in at the time. So far, they'd barely had any physical contact aside from when Tim was in distress. But tonight felt different. Tonight, Bruce was leaving him.

Yes, it was only for a day or two, and yes, he was only going to downtown Gotham. Bruce wasn't Tim's parents, jetting off to the other side of the world for weeks or months at a time. Bruce wasn't even leaving him home alone. And Bruce would sure as hell drop everything to come back the second Tim needed him.

Still.

Tim was staring at him now, looking more confused than ever. Bruce opened his mouth, then closed it again and made himself move. He went around the table, telegraphing his intention as clearly as he could, so that by the time he raised an arm at the height of Tim's shoulder, Tim actually leaned slightly into the touch. Bruce pressed him into his side for a moment, then ruffled Tim's hair as he pulled away.

"Hopefully I'll see you tomorrow night, okay?"

"Okay," said Tim. "And... good luck?"

Bruce chuckled. "Yeah. Thanks, bud. Goodnight."

"'Night," said Tim.

Bruce was only two steps out the door when he heard Tim's fingers start to fly over his keyboard. He smiled to himself, wondering what teenage drama Tim had missed in the group chat during those five minutes that he was away from the screen.

Alfred met him by the entrance to the garage and handed him a set of keys. “The car is packed and ready for you, sir.”

“Bossmobile?” Bruce guessed, falling back on Dick’s nickname for the silver Audi that Bruce took to the office more often than not.

“Indeed,” said Alfred, his moustache twitching with suppressed humour.

“Thank you, Alfred.” Bruce reached for the garage door handle, then hesitated, glancing back in the direction of the kitchen.

“We will be fine,” Alfred assured him gently. Bruce wondered if he’d heard what Tim had just said.

“Fine,” he repeated under his breath, and sighed. *Fine* was what he was worried about. Tim had been *fine* for years, alone in that big empty house just down the road. Bruce didn’t want him to have to be *fine* anymore.

“We’ll manage,” Alfred emphasized, in a low voice that wouldn’t carry. “You know you cannot take him with you this time.”

Bruce knew that. The break-in at the WE lab would require too much of both Bruce Wayne and Batman to have Tim with him this weekend. If Bruce brought Tim to stay at the penthouse, he would be cooped up somewhere unfamiliar while Bruce worked the case day and night. It would raise unnecessary questions about his whereabouts and put his identity at risk, because his comings and goings would be impossible to hide. Not to mention the Bat-equipment locked away in the penthouse. If Tim got bored, started wandering....

Bruce knew it was the right choice, leaving Tim here with Alfred. And yet.

Tell me I’m not doing exactly what Jack and Janet did, Bruce almost said. As weak as it made him feel, he craved Alfred’s reassurance.

Alfred would give it in a heartbeat if he asked. Alfred would probably even believe it as he said it. He always saw the best in people, even Bruce, even when he hadn’t done much to earn it.

“Okay,” Bruce said finally. “You’ll get him to the arcade in Kingston tomorrow afternoon?”

“Of course,” Alfred replied.

“And... if he has a nightmare—”

“I know.”

Bruce nodded. “Let me know if Pat agrees to come to dinner. I’ll try to get here. Tim seems really fond of h— uh, Pat.”

“Yes,” Alfred agreed. He seemed to be fighting back a smile again. “And, rest assured, I’ll provide an update on Pat’s pronouns as well, as soon as I receive one.”

Bruce huffed a laugh. “Thank you, Alfred,” he said again.

“Good luck, Master Bruce.”

Bruce stepped into the garage. The Audi let out its familiar chirp when he clicked the fob. Alfred had parked it close to the door. Bruce could see his briefcase on the backseat, no doubt filled with all the paperwork he’d gathered while he was on the phone with Nahum, the lab’s security chief. A fresh suit, zipped in a protective bag, hung from a hook above the back driver’s side window, and Bruce knew without checking that his *other* suit would be tucked away in the hidden compartment in the trunk.

Sometimes—okay, most times—he didn’t know what he would do without Alfred.

Traffic was light as he headed into the city. He let his mind wander back to the phone call he’d just had. He wished he’d been able to speak to Dr. Marcus, the lead scientist at the lab, but Nahum hadn’t been able to reach him yet.

Dr. Adam James Marcus—AJ—was an old acquaintance. They’d met almost ten years ago, when AJ was awarded a Thomas Wayne Medical Research Grant. During the awkward photo op that followed the presentation ceremony at the gala, AJ had remarked to Bruce that he was honoured to meet him. Bruce had almost tuned him out by reflex, but then AJ added that it wasn’t an honour because Bruce was Bruce, but because they were both members of the Three First Names Club. It was a corny joke, but it broke the ice between them, and they spent the rest of the evening talking about AJ’s work with impoverished communities in Gotham and abroad, and how the grant would let him continue to research affordable cancer treatments for those who needed them the most.

Hopefully AJ would be at the lab by the time Bruce arrived. He’d only

been head of the lab for two years, and nothing like this had happened during his tenure. Bruce wondered how AJ was handling it.

Not that it was that serious. From what Nahum described, it sounded like a standard smash 'n' grab— a rather common occurrence in Gotham, especially for some of the wealthier businesses. WE had very good insurance; Bruce wasn't worried about that.

What concerned him was that it only *sounded* like a smash 'n' grab. Even from his short conversation with Nahum, there were things about the crime that didn't add up. Nahum was no technician, but he couldn't name a single piece of equipment that was missing. Surely a low-level thief out to make a quick buck would have taken *something*. Especially—as was often the case—if the thief was involved in the drug trade. A top-of-the-line biomedical lab was chock full of items that a wannabe drug manufacturer would need. But nothing in the lab itself seemed disturbed, based on Nahum's initial assessment. Instead, it seemed that some of the offices had been ransacked, meaning that the thief had been motivated by a search for information rather than money or things. And *that* worried Bruce immensely.

It bothered him to think that he could have arrived in time to catch the thief himself if he'd been out on his regular patrol tonight, but there was nothing he could do about that now.

Bruce breathed out and tried to empty his mind of distractions as he drove over the bridge, settling *Bruce Wayne, CEO,* over his shoulders like a different sort of cape. It wasn't often that he had a civilian reason to be among the first on a crime scene like this. He'd have to play it rather carefully. It would raise too many eyebrows if he seemed to notice too much, or if his questions were too incisive. Thankfully, the police—even Gordon—always underestimated him, and it was always easier to show someone something they already expected to see.

As long as Gordon doesn't expect to see Batman, Bruce thought.

Surely not. Surely Gordon wouldn't turn on the signal for a simple smash 'n' grab, even if it *was* at a Wayne Enterprises office... right?

Your job is really important, Bruce heard Tim say again. How many times had Tim been told something like that? How often had he been expected to just accept that he wasn't a priority? His parents hadn't even remembered that it was his birthday when they'd asked to see him, for crying out loud, but *Lillian* had seemed more distraught about

that than Tim did.

“Maybe I should have known better,” she’d told Bruce on the phone a few days after the visit. “I didn’t want to colour his impression, though, you know? I didn’t want Tim to think I was judging them, or being unfair. But maybe I got his hopes up too high. I mean, I’d read his file. I should’ve known.”

It wasn’t Lillian’s fault, and Bruce had told her as much, as many times as she needed to hear it before she believed him. After all, Bruce had gotten his hopes up, too—his own as well as Tim’s—that maybe his parents weren’t going to disappoint Tim all over again.

At least he’d been okay since, Bruce reminded himself. No nightmares—unless there was one that he or Alfred missed, which Bruce doubted—and he hadn’t taken off, not even when his trip to the movies with Pat would have provided a perfect opportunity. Staying in that night—with no surveillance, no comm, no tracker—took a lot more willpower than Bruce would have expected. Especially when the Bat-Signal lit up the sky half an hour before Tim’s designated pick-up time. Only Alfred’s steady presence on the phone as he drove up to the theatre and spotted Tim, right where he said he’d be, had kept Bruce from tearing across the city to lay eyes on him in person.

Maybe Bruce should have swallowed his pride and called Dick tonight, just in case. But they hadn’t really talked—not one-on-one and not about anything significant—since their fight on that rooftop a month ago. Even though Dick had been at the manor more often than he had been since he first moved to Blüdhaven, he only hung out with Bruce when Tim or Alfred was around to be a buffer.

Bruce scowled and turned on the wipers when, in true Gotham fashion, raindrops began to fleck the windshield. A car passed in the opposite direction, its headlights diffused by the faint white mist that always gathered low to the ground near the river. He shook himself out of his thoughts again. He would be entering the city in just a few minutes, and he still hadn’t managed to quiet his mind. He took a deep breath, adjusted his grip on the steering wheel, and tried again.

Tim was startled for a second time when Alfred knocked on his partially-open bedroom door not long after Bruce left. Tim jolted away from the laptop and turned, purposefully putting his body between Alfred and the screen, before saying that he could come in.

“Just calling your attention to the hour, Master Tim,” said Alfred,

while Tim was still wondering who had learned stealth from whom. "Have you brushed your teeth yet?"

Tim glanced at the clock and winced. "I will in a minute," he said. "Sorry, I lost track of time."

Alfred nodded, but his eyes shifted over Tim's shoulder. "Reading?"

Shit. Tim made himself smile. "Sort of. It's a game." He casually reached behind him and closed the very-not-fictional police report.

Alfred hummed with approval. "Well, goodnight," he said rather pointedly.

"Goodnight, Alfred," Tim replied, watching him go and closing the door behind him. Then he breathed a small sigh of relief.

That was *way* too close. He should have known better than to try and sneak a quick peek at the GCPD database. He knew he didn't really have time, and he suspected that it would be pointless. (It was, of course. If there really *was* a break-in at a WE facility—or something else going down in the city that needed Batman's attention—the cops wouldn't file any reports about it until after midnight.)

He safely exited the police servers and set his computer to shut down before changing into his pyjamas. He closed the black screen when it was done and crossed the hall to the bathroom. He couldn't see Alfred, but he felt watched. He still wasn't sure where Alfred's room was. It didn't seem to be one of the closed doors in this hallway, but when Alfred appeared, he never seemed to be coming from far away. Maybe if Tim could figure out where Alfred was coming from, he'd be able to anticipate his arrival next time.

He left the door slightly ajar when he returned to his bedroom, just in case. Sometimes he slept with it open, which was a new habit that he didn't want to look too closely at. Something about a closed door when there were other people in the house—especially when Bruce and Dick made obvious efforts to make noise—had started to freak him out a little. Or maybe it had always freaked him out, and he just hadn't noticed until now. It wasn't like he was used to being in a big house with people around. Previously, that only happened during the short spells when his parents were home.

Knowing that his brain was too busy to sleep right away, Tim turned on the bedside lamp and opened the top drawer of his nightstand to take out the beat-up paperback book he'd started thinking of as his

insomnia cure. He'd found it in his room last week, wedged between the window seat cushion and the glass. The book's title didn't make any sense—he still didn't think "wuthering" was even a real word—and it was *incredibly* boring. Every time Tim picked it up, he only got a few sentences in before his eyelids were drooping. At this rate, it would take him a year or more to finish it, but he didn't care. It wasn't like he was actually invested. So far, the only interesting thing the narrator had done was complain about his landlord's dog.

The floor creaked outside Tim's door, and Tim looked up a split-second before Alfred knocked again. He waved Alfred inside.

"Apologies, Master Tim," Alfred started to say as he entered the room. "I just realized—"

Then he froze and went silent.

"Alfred?" said Tim. Alfred was so still that Tim rose and went to his side. Was Alfred having a heart attack or something? Should Tim check his pulse? Call 9-1-1?

He reached out before he remembered the book was still in his hand. Alfred stopped his wrist and held it.

"Where did you get that?" he asked in a tone of voice that Tim had never heard before.

"Get what?" said Tim, a chill creeping down his spine. "Alfred, are you okay?"

Alfred didn't answer the question. "The book, Timothy, where did you get that book?"

Everything in him went cold. Alfred had never used his full name, and never left out the formal address. Tim squirmed, but Alfred didn't let him go. His eyes were hard, fixed on Tim's. It was like he wasn't even Alfred anymore. Tim's heart sped up, thumping uncomfortably in his shaking chest.

You know I hate repeating myself, Timothy.

"I— I found it?" Tim said, unsure which voice he was answering.

Was that a question, Timothy?

He tried again. "I just found it, lying around."

Alfred dropped his wrist, but Tim didn't let himself feel relieved because nothing else about Alfred softened. He shook his head, his lips pressed into a thin line.

"I thought I had made myself clear," he said, each syllable clipped. "You were *not* to enter any of the other bedrooms on this floor. I cannot believe you've disobeyed me."

"Alfred, I didn't," Tim protested. His eyes were starting to sting. His voice cracked when he spoke again. "I swear I didn't."

Alfred raised one hand to cut off more explanations. "Please do not compound the situation with dishonesty, Master Tim."

The return of the title in that harsh voice made Tim take a step back. "I'm sorry," he blurted out. A reflex. "I'm really sorry, Alfred. The book was just there, b-by the window."

He flung an arm out towards it— or tried to. He *hated* that his body was shaking, and his voice was failing him, and his eyes were blurry, which was *not helpful,* he told them firmly—

Crying doesn't help with anything, dear. Just makes a mess.

—and Alfred didn't even seem to be listening. Why didn't grown-ups ever just *listen?*

"This is a violation of our trust," Alfred was saying. "I thought you would at least have a modicum of respect for Master Bruce's privacy. It was incredibly invasive, not to mention hurtful, to snoop like this, to barge in on—"

"Is this book supposed to be in Bruce's room? I can put it back," Tim broke in, grasping at any chance to get away. "I— I'll put it outside his door right now, okay? I'm sorry."

But Alfred stopped him again when Tim tried to get past him. Tim flinched—*hard*—without meaning to, when Alfred's hand made gentle contact with his shoulder.

"Wait. Where did you say you found this?" Alfred asked, but it wasn't a demand this time. Just a question.

Tim kept his head down to hide his tears because if Alfred saw— Tim couldn't let him see. He pointed at the window with the hand not holding the book, not wanting to make things worse by throwing it in

Alfred's face again.

"Over there. It was stuck between the cushion and the glass." Tim had to bite his tongue before the *sir* could slip out.

"In this room?" said Alfred, much softer.

Hope flared to life in Tim's chest, but he didn't quite trust it. "In this room," he repeated.

Stick to the facts, son. Facts can't hurt you.

"I'm not lying. I didn't go in any of the other bedrooms," he said, and though his voice was shaking, he kept talking. "I found the book in *this* room. I'm sorry."

(Please believe me.)

"Oh. My dear boy," said Alfred, his voice breaking. Tim raised his head in surprise, but before he could process what was happening, Alfred's arms were tight around him.

"I'm the one who should apologize," he said, his voice oddly muffled as he spoke into the top of Tim's head. "I'm so sorry. You've done nothing wrong, lad. I shouldn't have accused you. There there, now, it's alright," he went on. He rubbed Tim's back as Tim finally believed him and slumped into his hold, burying his face in Alfred's starched shirt. "I'm sorry, Tim. It's going to be alright."

Tim stayed where he was until his mother's voice reminded him again that he was making a mess. He pulled back to find that Alfred's eyes were just as red, his face just as wet. Alfred reached down and wiped the tears from Tim's cheeks.

"Come," he said, through a sniff.

He pulled on Tim's hands and led them both to the window seat. It was a little cramped— Alfred's leg was a warm line next to Tim's, but his presence was almost comforting. Tim pushed away the urge to bolt and tried instead to settle in against him.

After a long, quiet moment, Alfred reached for the book that Tim was still holding. His hands shook ever so slightly.

"May I?" he asked.

When Tim nodded, he took the book from Tim's grasp like it was

made of delicate crystal. The paperback book was around 400 pages, about an inch thick. Alfred traced the cracks in its well-worn spine and ran his thumb along the scuffed edges of its cover. He smiled at its many dog-eared corners. Tim had noticed that the last hundred or so pages were still squared-off and neat, but he hadn't thought anything of it until today, when just touching them caused Alfred's eyes to spill over once more.

Finally, Alfred opened the book and flipped through it, a few pages at a time. There were notes scrawled in the margins, mostly in pencil, but a few in blue ink. Tim hadn't gotten far enough in the book to read any of them yet, and he couldn't begin to guess at what they meant.

"I thought maybe he'd left it at school," said Alfred in a low voice.

Tim froze. He knew who *he* was. Nobody talked about him— not even Dick, not really. Bruce and Alfred never said his name. There was no trace of him anywhere in the manor. No pictures. No belongings. Nothing that said he used to live here.

Except this book, apparently.

"It so bothered me that I couldn't find it," Alfred went on. "When I knew he'd had it just days before...."

Tim didn't need to ask *before what.*

"But then Master Bruce closed off his bedroom, and I had to stop looking," Alfred said, thumbing the pages once more. "I decided, for my own sanity, that he must have forgotten it in his locker, and the school administrators overlooked it somehow when they sent his things home. Either that, or it was in his bag, or on his person, when.... And I— I didn't want to think about that."

Tim swallowed. His throat was thick, gummy from crying. He turned his head quickly and wiped away the fresh tears. He had no right to them, really. Tim had never even met... *him.* He'd wanted to, but whenever their paths crossed at formal events, Tim's parents would turn their noses up at *Bruce Wayne's latest charity case* and avoid introductions until the boy had left his adoptive father's side.

Tim had taken his picture, of course. But it wasn't like he knew him— even if, on lonely nights, he imagined that he did. He'd make up conversations, even speak his parts out loud when the house was too big and too empty for too long, and he felt like he was going crazy.

Robin kept him company. Robin always knew what to say. And when his parents hurt him, Robin *saw.* Robin *cared.*

Jason Todd had had no idea that Tim even existed, but Robin always made him feel better.

“Hard to believe it’s been here this whole time,” Alfred said, breaking Tim out of his memories. “Like he might walk in any day and just... pick it up again.”

“I’m sorry, Alfred,” Tim finally managed to say, even though it wasn’t enough.

Alfred looked over and shook his head. “You did nothing wrong,” he repeated, reinforcing the words with a gentle shoulder squeeze.

“No, I mean—” Tim blew out a breath, trying to find the words. “I’m sorry that I was the one to pick it up, and not him.”

Alfred nodded, another tear sliding down until it disappeared into his moustache. “Thank you, my dear boy,” he said. “It is... hard to talk about him. But necessary, I fear.”

“Do you—” Tim caught the question on its way out. He felt every inch the outsider. He had no right to ask, but maybe that meant he was the only one who could. “Do you want to talk about him some more?”

Alfred didn’t answer for a long moment. His shining eyes travelled around Tim’s room before they came back to the window seat they were sharing. And to the book, of course.

“I’d forgotten that he came in here sometimes,” he said, speaking to its cover. “Usually in the late afternoon, after school or on the weekends. It was where he went when he didn’t want to be disturbed.” Alfred smiled. “He used to say that Bruce made too much noise when he was trying to read.”

Considering how often Bruce managed to sneak up on him, Tim raised his eyebrows at that. Alfred went on.

“But I think he just liked the solitude sometimes. He could have had that in his own bedroom, or in the library, but there was something familiar, I think, about a space that didn’t seem like his. Perhaps it was easier to be where there were no expectations on him.”

“A getaway space,” Tim murmured, thinking of his darkroom.

“Yes,” Alfred agreed. “And the afternoon light in here is… well, I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

“Yeah,” said Tim, because he had. “You can see the sunset over the city.”

“It’s beautiful,” said Alfred, then he paused and smiled again. “Master Jason used to say that Gotham was always beautiful once you were far enough away.”

Tim wasn’t sure he agreed, but he wasn’t going to argue. Not when this was the first time that Alfred had said Jason’s name in the entire time that Tim had lived here.

He looked down at the well-worn paperback in Alfred’s hands. “He must have really liked that book,” he said instead.

To his surprise, Alfred frowned. “I’m actually not sure,” he said. “He called every character a *drama queen,* and gave quite a few speeches about how he didn’t understand at all what Cathy saw in Heathcliff.” Alfred paused, touching the squared-off final pages again. “I will always wonder how he’d feel about the ending.”

Tim swallowed the lump in his throat. He didn’t know what else to say, so he said, “He made a lot of a notes.”

“Yes,” Alfred agreed with a smile. “His teachers complained about him constantly writing in the school copies, so Master Bruce got in the habit of just buying him his own. Used copies most of the time, like this one.”

Tim watched the notes flicker by as Alfred thumbed once more through the pages. “He couldn’t just use a notebook or something?”

“He insisted this was the best way he learned. And, personally, I agree. To be a literary scholar, one must engage in conversation with the text.”

“Oh.” Distantly, Tim wondered if that was why English Lit was always his lowest grade.

“But…” Alfred went on after a moment. “I think perhaps he also did it on purpose, because he wanted to add to his collection. And, of course, every new book on the list meant another weekend trip to some of his favourite used bookshops, where he would conveniently find another dozen that he just *had* to have.”

Tim smiled, picturing it: Jason, dragging Bruce to dusty little bookstores all over Gotham; Bruce, looking resigned but pleased as he pulled out his credit card; stacks of books accumulating in Jason's room. He imagined Jason in this room—now Tim's room—curled up on this very window seat, reading by the light of the setting sun, a pencil at his side or maybe behind his ear, ready to scribble in the margins. And, once the sun set, Tim envisioned Jason tucking the book away, standing and stretching and following Bruce out into the night to fight crime on the streets of the city he thought was ugly but still worthy of protection.

"You should put it back," Tim told Alfred, his voice steady even though his chest was aching. "In Jason's room, with his other books. Where it belongs."

Alfred stared down at the cover for a long moment. When he finally looked up, his eyes were shining again. "Are you enjoying it?" he asked softly.

It took Tim a beat to understand the question. He shrugged. "It's okay," he replied, evasive. "I only just started."

"Keep reading," said Alfred. Gently, he pushed the book into Tim's hands. "I think— I think he would have liked that."

Tim wasn't sure he agreed—he was a stranger, he didn't have any right to touch Jason's stuff—but he didn't want to hurt Alfred's feelings, so he took the book, holding it just as carefully as he did.

"But—" said Alfred, hesitating. Tim waited, ready to give it back now that Alfred had come to his senses. That wasn't what happened, though.

"But do not let Master Bruce see," Alfred said after a moment. "I... don't know how he'll react."

Tim felt another chill. Alfred had freaked out, after all; Tim could only imagine what Bruce might do. Keeping the book seemed like a *really* bad idea now.

"Maybe I shouldn't," Tim started to say.

"Keep it in here," Alfred said at the same time. "In the drawer when you're not reading it. And when you've finished, let me know. I'll return it to Master Jason's room."

Tim tried to swallow down his apprehension. He was already keeping so many secrets from Bruce… but what was one more, for Alfred's sake?

"Okay," he said finally. "I won't let him see."

Alfred's smile was worth it.

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

> Tim reflects on what just happened with Alfred and makes some decisions about his next steps.
>
> *Tim stared at the red and black cover for a long moment before he gently picked the book up again. Slowly, he got to his feet, then turned and knelt on the window seat, facing the glass and his reflected silhouette.*
>
> *(If he squinted... the dark hair... maybe.... No. He dragged his eyes away.)*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alfred stayed in his room a little while longer, being incredibly nice to him, until Tim yawned, and he seemed to remember the time. He gave Tim a hug (which surprisingly lasted even longer than the last hug he got from Dick) and apologized once more before he said goodnight and left. Tim shut the door firmly behind him, and, after waiting another five minutes to make sure he wasn't coming back, he switched off the lamp, silently dropped his spare pillow in front of the door, and turned the lamp back on. Then he went to the window seat again and picked up *Wuthering Heights* once more.

Now that he had had a little time to process everything that had just happened, he could appreciate that this was *Jason's* book. Every dog-eared page, every crease in the spine, every ripple and tiny tear in the cover— all of it seemed precious, priceless. As he handled it delicately, he felt an unexpected kinship with his parents. Was this how they felt, digging up artifacts of the past? Knowing that someone now gone from this earth had touched this item, had held it, had loved it?

And the book was definitely well-loved. Or well-read, at least. From the way Alfred talked, maybe those were the same thing when it came to Jason's books. Tim thought of the black-haired boy he'd seen with Bruce at galas, and the red-clad vigilante who'd fought at Batman's side. He re-calibrated his brain, slotting this new information in between the bits he already knew:

Jason was a street kid... who read books until they fell apart.

Robin was a superhero... who dragged Batman to used bookstores on the weekends.

Jason Todd was Bruce Wayne's son... and English Lit was probably his highest grade.

Robin was killed by the Joker... before he'd finished reading *Wuthering Heights.*

Tim found himself reading it, too— not the actual words, but the notes. Some of them were exactly what Tim would expect of somebody who had to read this book for class. In other words, they were things that Tim had heard his English Lit teacher say, like *pathetic fallacy, unreliable narrator,* and *foreshadowing.* Unlike Tim, Jason clearly understood these ideas perfectly, as he offered no explanation aside from just pointing them out.

He'd also crossed out certain words, like the one that started with a G —given Dick's background, Tim could guess why—and he'd underlined others, offering definitions in the margins. Tim finally learned what *slovenly* meant, along with *mawkish, leveret,* and *ignominious,* which he doubted he could pronounce properly, but it seemed like it would be a fun word to say.

Other notes from Jason were more conversational. Tim chuckled at *'Nelly, my blunt queen, I adore you,'* and he laughed outright when '*can I punch this fucking guy?'* appeared on one page, then, several pages later: *'ok now can I punch this fucking guy?'* Tim had to admit he was intrigued when one chapter started with *'WAIT SHE WAS PREGNANT THIS WHOLE TIME??'* and he started reading, but he soon got lost in the convoluted language and flipped ahead again.

Eventually, though he really didn't want to, he came to the place where Jason's notes stopped. He kept turning pages, hoping that he and Alfred had been wrong, but there was no sign of Jason past page 286.

As Tim was searching, his eyes fell on a passage at the top of page 293 —

...he'll not win twenty. I doubt whether he'll see spring, indeed.

—and Tim put the book down before his shaking, clammy hands could ruin it.

He had no right to read this. No right to be here— to sit where Jason used to sit and read a book that Jason used to read. What was he thinking, pulling the book out of its hiding place? He should have guessed from the moment he saw it. He should have known. He should have left it where it was, or told Alfred right away when he found it. There was nothing else in Tim's room—the guest room—besides furniture; it should have been obvious that this book was out of place. Instead, Tim had wandered into a minefield and blew up something that had been sleeping for almost a year.

Thank god Bruce hadn't seen it. Tim would have ruined everything even more than he already had.

He stared at the red and black cover for a long moment before he gently picked the book up again. Slowly, he got to his feet, then turned and knelt on the window seat, facing the glass and his reflected silhouette.

(If he squinted... the dark hair... maybe.... No. He dragged his eyes away.)

It didn't take him long to find the exact spot where the book had been abandoned. He grasped the edge of the seat cushion and tugged until there was a gap between it and the window. He slid the book into the gap, spine-first, exactly as he'd found it.

(*Context is everything when it comes to interpreting an ancient artifact's significance,* his mother said to his father once, when they returned from a trip and discovered that Tim hadn't cleaned out the fridge the way he was supposed to. His father had actually laughed. Tim didn't get in trouble, and Mrs. Mac got a bigger paycheque than usual to do it herself.)

He let go of the cushion, burying the book again, and went to bed.

Two hours later, Tim sighed and shoved the covers down. He sat up and swung his legs to the side of the mattress. He didn't need to check that his spare pillow was still in place; he just turned the bedside lamp on at its lowest setting and got to his feet. He went to the desk and grabbed his laptop, taking it to the window seat.

But he paused in front of the glass. This... probably wasn't a good idea. He knew that. He knew that he'd been lying in bed for hours, letting his thoughts chase each other around, in and out of dozing and half-formed dreams of dark empty manor houses and skyscrapers that

lit up the night. And a hero in red who was always just ahead of him, just out of reach. Tim could catch him; he knew he could. He had before. Still, he'd come out of the dream frustrated and unfulfilled, having always just missed Robin.

Now, awake, he had the proof in his hands. He had dozens of pictures. He could look. He could do what he couldn't do in the dream. But did he really want to? Was this really the best thing to do right now?

He sat at the window and opened his laptop. Navigating to his photo library, he had the uncomfortable but satisfying sense that he was picking at a scab. He told himself to stop. He even invoked his mother's voice, but it was useless. He had to see.

There. With a deep breath, he opened his *Robin II* folder. He clicked through photo after photo, watching Jason glide between rooftops, swing from gargoyles, punch bad guys. Batman wasn't in these pictures; these were from nights when Robin went out on his own. It had taken Tim a little while to figure out the pattern of his solo patrols; unlike Batman, Robin tended to be a little more improvisational, going where he felt he was needed. More often than not, that was Crime Alley, and Tim had hard time following him there. But every now and then he got a shot, and he always took it.

There was a sub-folder in *Robin II.* Labelled *x_delete,* so it appeared at the bottom of the alphabetical order, Tim hoped the name would keep anyone from bothering to try and open it. If they did, they would find that it was password-protected, and that none of Tim's other passwords worked. He clicked on it and carefully typed in the 23-character combination of capital letters, lower-case letters, numbers, spaces, and symbols that made a sentence only three other people on the planet could conceivably guess.

The folder opened. It contained seven photos that told a story Tim felt fortunate to have witnessed.

The first: Batman descends from a grapple line into a deserted dead-end alley, one arm around Robin's waist. Robin's face and mask is dripping with something.

The second: Batman checks over his shoulder to make sure they weren't followed. His fingers dig for something in his belt. Robin's hands are on either side of his mask.

(Batman had looked up as well, checking the edges of the rooftops above them. Tim had managed to duck just in time.)

The third: Robin's mask is off, revealing the face of Jason Todd. If anyone was looking from the other end of the alley, they would see nothing but Batman, his cape spread slightly wider than usual, creating a screen between the world and his son.

The fourth: Robin pours water from a small bottle over his face, rinsing his eyes. Batman is helping to tilt Robin's head back. The bright red of the costume is darkened around his shoulders and partway down his chest.

(Tim had shivered in sympathy, because it wasn't very warm out that night.)

The fifth: Robin continues to rinse his eyes, but Batman has lowered the white lenses of his cowl and watches the process closely, concern evident in his blue eyes even from three storeys up.

The sixth: Robin is bent forward. Water still drips from his hair and chin. Batman's hand is on his back, his mouth turned down in worry, his eyes practically slits as he asks Robin an obviously serious question.

The seventh: Robin is in the same position, but everything has changed in the last few seconds, because Batman is smiling. Laughing, even. His shoulders have dropped, and there is an unfamiliar light in his eyes.

(Even now, that light was unfamiliar.)

Tim would go to his grave before he showed this folder to anyone. No one—not Bruce, not Alfred, not Dick—could know of its existence. But, for the first time ever, he was tempted to go to Alfred and show him. To tell him everything he knew. He wanted Alfred (and Dick, and Bruce, he supposed) to know that he was also sad about Jason. Or, about Robin, anyway. He wanted them to know that he knew a little bit about the hero they'd lost.

Tim mentally set aside the fallout of revealing himself to Batman and his inner circle and just let himself imagine it. Maybe the pictures would help. Maybe Bruce would appreciate them, would even thank Tim for saving them. After all, there were no family portraits around the manor with Jason in them. There were no candid shots taped to the fridge, or framed photographs on the wall. Maybe Bruce (and Dick, and Alfred) would like to have some new pictures to remember Jason by.

Or maybe it was like his books, like his bedroom— too painful to look at, and they wanted to shut it all out, pretend none of it happened, and go about their lives.

Tim closed the folder. He was an outsider, a stalker. He had no right to any of this. He wasn't Bruce's son. He wasn't Dick's sort-of kid brother, or Alfred's sort-of grandkid.

But there was one thing he could do. To alleviate some of his guilt, to take the edge off his need to tell somebody that *he lost Robin, too.* He scrolled through the rest of his pictures until he found one of his favourites. In the photo, Robin was in profile on a low flat roof, his colourful costume stark against the grey smear of a cloudy Gotham midnight. Tim was practically at eye level with him for once, as he was perched on top of a building across the street. Robin was standing with one leg behind the other, but his back foot hadn't quite touched the ground yet. His arms were raised, bent slightly at the elbow, and even from the side, Robin's triumphant grin was obvious.

This was the only photo that Tim managed to get of Robin practising his back handspring.

He wished he'd gotten more, but he'd been so fascinated by the sight that his camera was an afterthought. For some reason, it had never occurred to him that Robin had to *practise* things, that he wasn't just instantly good at fighting or gymnastics or running or swimming or grappling up to the rooftops. Robin always seemed... magical to Tim, even more so than Batman.

Immediately after Tim snapped this picture of Robin's almost perfect landing, Robin had raised a hand to his ear, all business once more. He'd approached the edge of the roof, and the next photo Tim took was of his serious, Batman-like scowl as his eyes clearly moved behind his mask. Tim remembered wondering what he was looking for—and fearing for a moment that he was looking for *him*—but whatever it was, Robin found it a minute later and took off, back toward the docks where Tim guessed Batman would be based on that night's patrol route.

Tim selected the second photo and copied it to another folder. His fingers moved with muscle memory, following the correct sequence of clicks and taps to remove the photo's metadata, activate his VPN and other safeguards, and open his blog. He uploaded the photo with a simple caption—*from my archives*—and posted it. Then he did the whole process again in reverse, disappearing from the web once more.

He shut down his computer and sighed.

He still didn't think he could sleep.

He got to his feet and went to his nightstand. He reached for his phone instinctively, but changed direction at the last moment and went for the empty water glass instead. A trip down to the kitchen and back might tire him out, he thought.

Outside his room, the manor was silent. Tim's lamp seemed painfully bright compared to the faint nightlight in the bathroom that usually lit the hall. As quickly and quietly as he could, he pulled the door closed behind him, and gave his eyes a moment to adjust before heading to the top of the stairs. The wood floor creaked slightly despite his best efforts, but he saw no sign of Alfred as he made his way down.

It wasn't as dark in the kitchen as he feared (which was good, because he realized about halfway through his journey that he didn't know where the kitchen light switch was). The glass doors to the terrace were letting in plenty of pale white moonlight. Tim wandered closer, looking out at the property. The full moon was so bright that the grass was almost green, and he couldn't see any stars in the sky. It'd been a long time, he realized, since he'd been far enough outside the city to see something like this. He was tempted to go back upstairs and grab his digital camera, slip into his shoes and a sweater, and wander the grounds taking pictures... but the blinking red sensor beside the terrace door reminded him that that was a bad idea.

He'd had a code to the security system since his first night here. Theoretically, he could disarm it, then come and go as he pleased, and re-arm it when he was done for the night. Theoretically, he might get away with it. But he'd be foolish to think that Bruce didn't periodically—or regularly—check the security logs. And what if Tim screwed it up somehow, and triggered the alarm? It was too risky to try on a whim, no matter how beautiful the moonlight was tonight.

He turned away from the door, went to the sink, and turned on the filtered tap. While he waited a few seconds for it to run cold, he wondered if he could hack the manor's security system and make the uses of his code invisible. No one would notice; he hadn't had to use his code even once so far, since he'd never come to the manor alone, and the manor was never empty. So it wasn't like it would stick out if Tim's code stopped appearing in the logs.

He'd never done something like that before, but it couldn't be too

hard, right?

He huffed and stuck his glass under the stream of water. *Maybe* he could hack it, if Bruce's system was an ordinary one. But this was Batman's house. There was no way his security system was run-of-the-mill. Still, poking around might be a fun project, and finding a way to come and go as he pleased was something he'd been meaning to do since he got here. If he got caught, though....

Well. If he got caught, then Bruce would just send him back to CPS. Tim would go to a different foster home and start all over again, until he could get emancipated.

His hand was suddenly cold and wet, alerting him to the fact that his glass was overflowing. With a whispered curse, he shut off the tap and tilted the glass to pour out the excess water. Then he set the glass down in the sink and reached for one of Alfred's dainty little hand towels. Drying his hands and wiping the outside of his glass took all his attention for the next few seconds, and when he was done, he took his water back to the terrace door.

Did he want to be sent away, he wondered. He had, when he first got here— he'd wanted out of Batman's house and off his radar as soon as possible, so he could get back to work. Then he'd allowed himself to get distracted. By a business trip that wasn't about business, and conversations about cold cases, and family dinners. And birthday gifts. And hugs. And kind words. And activities that fathers and older brothers—

No. He wasn't Bruce's son, he reminded himself sharply. He wasn't Dick's little brother. Dick's brother, Bruce's son, was *dead.* Tim was just... Tim. He was here because Batman wanted him here, because he was under the suspicion of the Dark Knight. Or maybe Batman really was none the wiser to Tim's identity (he seemed to be some days), and Tim was here because Bruce Wayne felt guilty about a fellow one-percenter's kid going into the foster system.

Tim was Batman's stalker, the Wayne family's neighbour, *Bruce Wayne's latest charity case.* Nothing more.

And it didn't matter, anyway. Tim had a plan. He'd had it since the day CPS took him out of Drake Manor. He was seeking emancipation, to be fully on his own the way he'd always known he was meant to be. That way, no one could let him down ever again. He had his own back; now he just needed to follow through, and not get attached to

anything—or anyone—he encountered along the way.

In a sense, Bruce was helping him with this, though he didn't know it, by giving Tim a steady allowance and paying for things like his phone bill. Tim could now make the decision to risk his savings by talking to a better lawyer. He knew there were some that offered free consultations— he would interview a few, he decided. He'd shop around, maybe use one of his dad's business tricks and play them off each other to get a better deal.

Yes, he thought, turning away from the terrace doors at last. He'd waited too long on the community legal services. It was time to accelerate the timeline, get back on track. Once the emancipation came through, it'd be final: Tim wouldn't be Bruce's son, and Bruce wouldn't be able to do anything about that, even if he felt guilty or suspicious enough to try and make Tim's stay permanent.

Tim climbed the stairs and paused before heading to his room. His eyes roamed down the hall. One of those closed doors was Dick's old bedroom; one was Jason's. The one at the end of the hall was Bruce's.

Distance was good, he decided. He would back off, so when he cut ties, it would be a seamless transition. Then he could move on, and Bruce and Alfred and Dick could grieve Jason in peace without some interloper sitting in his spot, reading his books, pretending to be part of his family.

Chapter End Notes

> For anyone desperately curious, Tim's password is *J@5oN t0dD 1$ r0b!n_II*.

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

> Alfred meets Pat. Pat saves Tim's ass. Tim introduces Pat to one of his hobbies.
>
> *"I've been encouraging him to invite you round for dinner since you two went to the movies, but I suppose the timing just hasn't been right."*
>
> *"The movies?" Pat repeated.*
>
> *Tim realized he'd made a critical error.*

Chapter Notes

> Posting a little early because the last two updates have been really heavy, and we could all use some fluff!

Despite Tim's best efforts, Alfred wouldn't let him take the bus down to Kingston to meet Pat at the arcade. He also wasn't satisfied with just dropping Tim off and driving away. Instead, he insisted on waiting with Tim for Pat to arrive. And when Tim tried again to tell him that that wasn't necessary, Alfred put his arm around Tim's shoulders.

"I assure you, it is," he said simply.

Tim tried not to make a face as Alfred pulled him to his side. Even after everything last night, it still felt a bit strange to be this close to him. Just like it did when Bruce half-hugged him goodbye in the kitchen, or when Dick idly patted him on the arm as he walked by. Tim wasn't sure whether these actions felt strange because they actually *were* strange or whether this kind of physical touch was perfectly normal, and *he* was the weird one. (He added that to the ever-growing list of things he'd never been able to figure out.)

He was grateful a few seconds later when Alfred let him go, obviously recognizing that it was just too hot for hugs, standing as they were on a Gotham City sidewalk without a shred of shade.

"Master Bruce would never forgive me if I let you wander off alone," Alfred added. "Besides, I'm eager to meet young Pat."

“Why?” Tim couldn’t help asking.

“Pat seems important to you,” Alfred replied with a bland sort of smile. “One might even say Pat is... special.”

Tim looked up at Alfred with narrowed eyes, but Alfred stayed silent, giving nothing away.

“I guess,” Tim agreed after a moment. “Pat *is* kinda the only new friend I’ve made since I moved out of my parents’ house.”

Alfred nodded. There was something almost expectant about it.

“And it’s cool,” Tim fumbled on, because he always knew when grown-ups wanted a better explanation, even if he didn’t always know why, “because Pat’s going to Gotham Academy this fall, too, so—”

“Oh, that’s wonderful,” Alfred interjected. “You’ll be together.”

“Uh... yeah,” said Tim, a little thrown by Alfred’s eagerness. “I mean, I had friends there before, but it’ll be nice walking in on my first day knowing Pat’s there, too.”

Alfred’s smile widened. Until this very moment, Tim never knew what it meant when someone said a person’s eyes were twinkling, but there was no other word for it: Alfred’s eyes were twinkling.

“It’s important for a young man to have... a *friend,”* he said.

Okay, Tim thought. This was officially Weird.

“Yep,” Tim said quickly, scanning the street for a distraction. “Oh, hey, a dog park. Guess a lot of people in this neighbourhood have dogs, huh? Dogs are great, I like dogs. Never actually *had* a dog...”

“Master Bruce used to have a German Shepherd that he was quite fond of,” said Alfred, and Tim breathed an enormous (and silent) sigh of relief.

“Cool,” he said, latching onto the subject. “Like, when he was a kid?”

“A little younger than you,” Alfred answered. “His name was Ace.”

“Good name,” Tim commented, and Alfred huffed.

“Thank you. It was my doing. Master Bruce wanted to call him Peanut Butter.”

Tim laughed. At almost the exact same moment, a car horn honked, and he looked up to see Pat's mom's SUV rolling up to the curb. Pat hopped out, and the SUV drove off; Pat's mother apparently didn't share Alfred's—or more likely Bruce's—paranoid worries about leaving her teenager unattended.

"Hey, Tim!" called Pat, jogging up.

"Hey," Tim echoed with a grin. Pat was wearing a white top over a long jean skirt and pink high-top sneakers. "You look awesome," he added, because Pat had said something about this outfit at swim class, and Tim had encouraged Pat to wear it today.

"Thanks." Pat's cheeks were turning the same colour as the sneakers, but Tim hoped that was a good thing. Then Pat's eyes drifted past Tim, and Tim remembered that he wasn't standing here alone.

"This is Alfred," Tim said, then he paused, because he didn't quite know how to introduce him. Thankfully, Alfred chose that moment to take over.

"Alfred Pennyworth, at your service," he said. "My pronouns are he/him."

Tim's eyebrows shot up at that, but Pat didn't even blink, taking Alfred's offered hand and shaking it quickly.

"Cool. I'm Pat. They/them, I guess." They shrugged. "I don't know. Changes by the minute sometimes, I swear."

"That's quite all right," said Alfred, with a warm smile. "I'll use they and them for now, and you just let me know if that changes, yes?"

"Sure," said Pat. They sent a look towards Tim, and Tim lifted his shoulders in a tiny shrug, because he hadn't seen this coming, either.

"Master Tim speaks very highly of you, Pat," Alfred continued. (Tim watched Pat's mouth form the word *Master?)* "I've been encouraging him to invite you round for dinner since you two went to the movies, but I suppose the timing just hasn't been right."

"The movies?" Pat repeated, and Tim realized he'd made a critical error.

He forced a laugh, wishing they were sitting down, so he could nudge Pat unobtrusively. He settled for reminding Pat of the name of the

movie that *they definitely went to see together*.

“Remember?” he said, blinking three times out of Alfred’s line of sight. *Please don’t blow this for me,* he hoped his eyes were saying.

Pat caught on immediately. “Oh, right!” they exclaimed, possibly overselling it, but that was better than a flat-out denial. “Yeah, of course. That was a good movie. I went and saw it again with my brother a few nights ago.”

“Oh, yeah?” said Tim, relaxing somewhat. “How was it the second time?”

“Really good,” Pat said emphatically, “but the romantic subplot was dumb.”

Tim honestly, truly could have kissed them.

Alfred chuckled. “I suppose you two will just have to agree to disagree on that,” he said.

Pat sent a quick confused look at Tim before they laughed.

“Guess so,” Tim said for both of them. “Well, should we get inside?”

It wasn’t exactly one of those subtle, graceful exits his mother had trained in him for gala events (wherever she was, she probably just felt a wave of disappointment without knowing why), but it worked. Alfred said his goodbyes and reminded Tim that he would return at 5:30 to pick him up.

“And you are, of course, welcome to join us at the manor for dinner, Pat,” he added, just when Tim thought he was home free.

“Oh,” said Pat with surprise. They glanced at Tim, who kept his expression as neutral as possible, then said, “Uh, thanks, but my mom’s making lasagne.”

“Of course,” Alfred replied smoothly. “Another time, perhaps. Have fun today, b— uh, have fun!”

“Thanks, Alfred,” Tim called after him, waving. He stayed on the sidewalk a moment longer, watching the black Rolls Royce pull away, before turning back to head inside and catch up with Pat.

Except that when he turned around, Pat was literally right behind him, their arms folded over their chest.

“What?” Tim said apprehensively.

“Well, aren’t you gonna tell me?” asked Pat.

“Tell you…?”

“What you were doing instead of going to the movies with me?” Pat blew out a breath, but Tim could tell they were playing annoyed more than they were actually bothered. “You dragged me into your web of lies, Tim. I think I deserve to know what I just helped you cover up.”

“That… is a really good point,” Tim admitted with a sigh. “Okay. I told Bruce and Alfred I was going to the movies with you, but I actually just wandered around the neighbourhood taking pictures.”

Whatever Pat had been expecting, it wasn’t that. They tilted their head, and Tim noticed for the first time that they had a tiny silver stud in their left earlobe.

“Like, with your phone?” they asked.

“No,” said Tim. Deciding it was easier to just show them, he pulled his backpack off his shoulder and opened it. Pat looked with some interest at the old film camera inside. Tim had brought it today instead of the digital because he’d thought it would be cool to get black and white shots of the vintage pinball machines inside the arcade.

“That would be cool,” Pat agreed, once Tim explained this to them. But they still looked confused.

“What?” Tim prompted again.

Pat shook their head. “Nothing, just… I was expecting you to say you had a girlfriend, or maybe you got invited to the captain of the hockey team’s party or something.”

Tim couldn’t help the snort that escaped his throat. “Seriously? Me?”

Pat’s cheeks were going pink again. They shrugged. “Hey, I’ve only known you a few weeks. You could be secretly cool. Like, deep down.”

“Thanks,” Tim replied dryly. He noticed Pat watching him, but when Tim tried to catch their eye, they looked away.

“So, you don’t have a girlfriend?” they said, still not looking at him. “Or… boyfriend?”

“No,” Tim said. “And I don’t really want one right now,” he added honestly, thinking of all the rumours that swirled at school about who was taking who to the dance or whether so-and-so was cheating on such-and-such with what’s-his-name. “I don’t get people who are constantly obsessed with dating, or crushes, or whatever.”

There was a pause before Pat said, “Right. Yeah.”

Tim nodded, glad they agreed on this. “Anyway,” he said, getting them back on track, “don’t worry. You weren’t covering for anything serious. I don’t even know if Bruce would get me in trouble, but—well,” he interrupted himself, “he probably wouldn’t like that I climbed up on the roof.”

“You—” Pat’s hazel eyes went huge. “What? You climbed a roof? How?”

“Oh,” said Tim, his face going warm. It’d been so long since he’d talked to someone about his hobbies that he’d forgotten they weren’t exactly normal. “I went up on a fire escape and took pictures of the skyline,” he explained. “It was a low roof,” he added, when Pat said nothing. “Only like, six storeys. I was careful.”

Pat was staring as Tim ran out of words and started squirming. He was out of practice at having friends, apparently. At this rate, he’d scare Pat off before school started.

Then they grinned. “That’s awesome,” they exclaimed. “You *are* secretly cool!”

“Well, I don’t know—” Tim started to protest. His cheeks were flaming now, and it wasn’t just from the sun.

“Do you have the pictures with you? Can I see them?”

“I don’t,” Tim answered with genuine regret. “They’re on my digital camera, and I didn’t bring that today.”

“Oh. That’s okay,” said Pat brightly. “So, which building should we hit this afternoon?”

Tim blinked. “Um... what?”

“Where’s the best angles?” Pat asked, shielding their eyes with their hand and looking around. “Maybe that one?” they suggested, pointing to a five-storey apartment building less than a block away.

“I don’t— what is going on?” Tim managed to say at last.

“I know your secret now,” said Pat with a shrug. “That means I’m coming with you.”

“I wasn’t— you— what?” Tim sputtered. “What about the arcade?”

Pat rolled their eyes and grabbed Tim’s wrist. “We can go to the arcade any time. Come on. You’ve gotta help me climb the fire escape in this skirt without breaking my neck.”

They managed it, Tim keeping a close eye both on Pat’s skirt and the street to make sure they weren’t caught. He felt a little dazed, like he couldn’t quite believe this was happening, but it became all too real once they were on the roof.

“This is so cool,” said Pat, looking down on the dog park sprawled below.

“Careful,” Tim said absently.

“I’m, like, miles from the edge,” Pat said. Tim could tell from their tone that they were rolling their eyes again. “I’m not gonna fall.”

“I know,” Tim replied. “But somebody might see you and call the cops.”

“Oh.” Pat moved back immediately. “I didn’t think about that.”

Tim smiled faintly. He was tempted to tell Pat the story of the night he learned that lesson firsthand, but he took out his camera instead, and Pat made their way over to him to take a look.

Tim held it carefully—it was an antique, after all—and examined it, familiarizing himself with the dials and buttons. Pat kept up a steady stream of conversation, which allowed him to talk through it, explaining the various functions and what kind of effect they would have on the picture. Pat asked a lot of questions about the development process, too, and, without a second thought, Tim said they should come over and see his darkroom.

Pat beamed at that, then asked, “Do you want to take some pictures of me?”

“Uh,” said Tim, caught off-guard. He’d never really had a willing subject before, and not one this close up. “They’ll be in black and

white," he cautioned.

Pat sent a quick regretful look towards their pink sneakers, but said, "That's okay."

It was better than okay. It was actually pretty fun. Tim felt a little silly at first, directing Pat on where and how to stand, but Pat's obvious enjoyment was enough to loosen him up after just a few minutes. Soon, he was laughing as much as they were, snapping picture after picture of Pat's silly faces and ridiculous poses.

They were forced to pause when they filled up the roll of film. Luckily, Tim had brought three today. Alfred had given him spares along with the camera on his birthday and explained how to change the roll, but Tim hadn't done it himself yet. Pat wandered the rooftop, clearly a little bored, while he figured it out.

He'd barely closed up the back of the camera when Pat said, "Wow. Broad daylight and everything. Never change, Gotham."

Tim looked up. Pat was staring in the direction of the dog park again, but he couldn't see what they were looking at. He tightened his hold on his camera and went to Pat's side.

It didn't take him long to notice what was amiss. On the far side of the fenced-off dog park was a row of connected townhouses, each with a laneway and a small yard divided from its neighbours by hedges. The house directly across from Tim and Pat, the third in the row, currently had a pair of people on its tiny porch, prying open the door.

"Maybe they just locked themselves out," Pat said.

It took Tim a second to recognize that Pat was kidding, and another few seconds to swap lenses, raise his camera, and zoom in. He could see that the figures were men, and they had most of their faces covered— definitely not innocent residents getting into their own house. One of the men was tall and skinny, the other shorter and more husky, like a wrestler or a rugby player. He was the one working the crowbar now, and Tim got a lucky break when he yanked down his balaclava to wipe sweat from his chin. He snapped a picture on instinct.

"I'm calling the police," Pat declared loudly, pulling their phone out of their skirt pocket.

Was it Tim's imagination, or did the men's movement stutter at the

sound of their voice? “Shh,” Tim cautioned just the same. “Don’t do that. Get down.”

“What?” Pat hissed, but at least they followed Tim’s lead and crouched low enough that they could stay close to the edge without being seen from the ground. “Tim, what are you doing?”

Tim didn’t answer, continuing to take pictures as the men got the door open. The husky man went inside first, the skinny man keeping watch for a few seconds before following. Though most of his face was covered as well, Tim got a few shots. Then the man followed his partner inside, and Tim breathed out a small sigh of relief.

“Dude,” said Pat. Tim had almost forgotten they were there. He looked over to find Pat staring at him open-mouthed. “What the hell?”

Tim hesitated, wondering how much he should tell them. Pat spoke again before he could decide.

“Most people see something like that, they call the cops,” they said.

“You can call them now, if you want,” said Tim, and Pat started tapping at their phone screen. “But they’re gonna want to know who you are,” Tim added, “and you might need to explain that we only saw this because we’re trespassing.”

Pat’s thumbs faltered, and they sighed. “You’re right.”

Tim nodded. “Unfortunately.”

“So what do we do?”

“The GCPD has a website for crime reporting and anonymous tips,” Tim said, which was true. “I’ll scan these pictures once they’re developed and upload them,” he added, which wasn’t.

Pat’s eyes narrowed. “You’ve done this before, haven’t you?”

Tim bit his bottom lip, then shrugged, deciding to come clean. “I like to take pictures at night, and this is Gotham, so… yeah.”

“Wow,” Pat murmured. They were looking at Tim like… Tim didn’t know what, but they were serious, and they were fascinated. Tim squirmed under the attention. “What all have you seen?”

“Mostly little things,” Tim answered. It was almost true. “Like this—break-ins and stuff. I don’t even know if the GCPD does anything with

the pictures I send," he added, another not-quite-truth. He gave Pat a wry smile. "They're pretty busy. Maybe nobody checks that email."

Pat huffed out a laugh, and the tense atmosphere of the roof lifted suddenly. Tim gathered up his camera and backpack, then got to his feet and reached down with his free hand. Pat gazed up at him with a faint smile before they put their hand in his and allowed Tim to pull them up. Together, they headed over to the fire escape. Tim went down first, with Pat following closely, so Tim could make sure their skirt didn't get caught under their feet. When they reached the bottom of the ladder, Tim held their hand as they climbed onto the lid of the dumpster, then helped them down to the pavement.

"Whew," Pat sighed. "Getting down is a lot scarier than going up."

"Yeah," Tim chuckled. He glanced around the parking lot out of habit, but there was no one in sight, and no one passing by on the street seemed to notice them. He gestured in the direction of the arcade, and they started walking.

"So," Tim said after a moment. "You still think I'm secretly cool?"

Pat laughed lightly. "I don't know," they replied. "You're kinda weird, but that was fun."

Tim nodded. "Weird but fun," he repeated. "I can live with that."

"This is Gotham, so it's a low bar," Pat pointed out. "Nobody's normal here."

"True," Tim said. They'd reached the arcade, but if he went to the end of the block and turned left....

"You want to go take down the address, don't you?" Pat asked, seeming to read his mind.

Tim's face was warm. "Uh... yeah?"

Pat nodded, then shrugged. "Well, lead on."

"You don't have to come with me," Tim countered.

Pat straightened their shoulders. "I give you my word of honour—and I never broke it in my life—that I will take a cab straight to the police station and give you away, unless you let me share this adventure with you."

Tim blinked, confused not only by the words but also the *terrible* British accent in which Pat had said them. “Um… what?”

“Watson says that to Holmes,” Pat explained, thankfully using their normal voice again. “In *The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton.”*

“Oh.”

“When Holmes is about to do something really dumb.”

“Ah.”

“Don’t tell me you never read that one. It’s a classic!”

Tim looked away to hide his smirk as he asked, “Which movie was that?”

Pat’s frustrated yell echoed off a nearby building. Tim’s laugh was almost louder.

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

> Tim Drake vs. the Gotham City Police Department (Round 1). Meanwhile, Bruce has a rough day at the office, and Alfred braces for a long night.
>
> *Tim really didn't have time to wait around for this moron (who was somehow allowed to carry a gun!) to notice the (extremely obvious!!) help that Tim was trying to give him and his department.*

Of course Tim's plan was foiled by a Gotham City police officer.

Not that the cop noticed, or did it on purpose. Tim wouldn't even be all that mad if he did.

(Honestly. It might be a relief for the cops to figure it out and call Bruce. At least then Tim wouldn't have to worry about what to do if Bruce knew or wrestle with how to come clean if he didn't. It would all be over— for good *or* bad.)

But no. The cop—now directing traffic with his eyes half-closed and a lazy twist of his wrist—had *no* idea how much he was ruining Tim's day.

Tim winced and turned away from the crosswalk when another car drove over his envelope. The trio of French tourists in front of him in line noticed his expression and edged slightly away from him. Tim just rolled his eyes and ignored them. They'd come to *Gotham.* They should have expected a little weirdness, even here in the kitschy tourist trap that was Bristol Central Square. It was one of the safest places in Gotham during the day, mainly because it was *crawling* with cops. You couldn't go more than ten steps without running into one. Unfortunately, since it was such a popular patrol route, statistically speaking, you were more like to encounter a fresh-faced rookie or a worn-out veteran, neither of whom would be much help if something serious were actually going down.

Tim couldn't tell which of those he was dealing with today. The cop's hair was so short it barely showed under his large hat, so it could be grey... or pink, for that matter. He didn't have a beard, but he also didn't have any acne or prominent wrinkles. He was of medium build, not a lanky young man or a portly almost-retiree. Tim wondered if,

subconsciously, he'd chosen this officer *because* he was so nondescript: an anonymous target for an anonymous tip.

But even if that were the case, it didn't change the fact that his plan—his careful, meticulous, cleverly crafted plan—had fallen apart just seconds after its initiation.

The preparation had gone smoothly— better than he expected, honestly. With Bruce still at the penthouse, Alfred hadn't suspected anything when Tim told him he wanted to start developing his pictures Saturday after dinner. With two full rolls of film, the process took the rest of the weekend, even though he only enlarged and printed a handful (the crime photos and a few that he and Pat had taken of themselves playing various machines at the arcade, so Tim had some to show Alfred and Bruce if either of them asked.)

After the pictures were finished late on Sunday, Tim had oh-so-innocently asked Alfred if he had any envelopes, so he could bring a few photos with him to his swim class on Monday to give to Pat. Alfred, predictably, had handed Tim a small stack of envelopes, saying he'd taken them from Bruce's study. Naturally, they were high-quality, probably expensive. They were so fancy that the paper was actually soft under his fingers, and they had a built-in sticker thing, so Tim just had to peel off the backing instead of licking that gross-tasting glue. In other words, they were, like, ten times better than the ones he used to get from the dollar store.

Which was a good thing, because there was no way those cheap envelopes would have withstood the abuse that he was currently watching his poor little evidence packet endure today.

Once he had the pictures, it was a simple matter of telling Alfred that he wanted to go the library before swim class. Alfred had dropped him off, then disappeared to run errands, promising to return in about an hour to drive him to the aquatic centre. Tim had gone into the library for five minutes, then doubled back and caught a bus. It was a ten-minute ride to Bristol Square. Then another ten minutes to spot an intersection with no traffic cams and find a big enough crowd to blend in with. Two minutes to wait for the light, twelve seconds to cross the street, and less than a second to unobtrusively drop the envelope at the cop's feet.

He kept pace with the crowd for almost another minute, then glanced back, expecting to see the envelope gone. But it was still on the pavement. From where he was standing, he could see the text he'd so

carefully printed on the front, in a style that didn't at all match his usual handwriting. It was addressed to Commissioner Gordon, care of the Gotham City Police Department, with the address of the headquarters written below for good measure.

The light changed, and the cop cleared the last of the pedestrians out of the intersection before starting to direct traffic in the other direction. A sports car was the first to step on the gas, and Tim's envelope fluttered further into the street, where it was promptly run over. Twice.

Unsure what else to do, Tim joined a long line-up for an ice cream stand, watching and waiting. The envelope stayed put, stayed intact, even stayed facing the right way up from what he could see. Surely the cop would notice it when the signal changed again... right?

Nope.

Tim let out a long sigh, making the French tourists put another few inches of space between them and him. He had low expectations for the GCPD in general, but this was absurd. Literally all the cop had to do was *look down.* Was that too much to expect from Gotham's finest?

He glanced at his watch. The bus that would take him back to library would arrive in less than ten minutes, and he ran the risk of not being where Alfred expected him to be if he missed that bus and had to get the next one. He really didn't have time to wait around for this moron (who was somehow allowed to carry a gun!) to notice the (extremely obvious!!) help that Tim was trying to give him and his department.

He should have found another way. He would have put the photos in the mail, if he wasn't worried about the thieves leaving town before the GCPD got involved. He thought about researching GCPD assignments and placing the packet in the path of one of Gordon's detectives. That was how he used to do it, back when he wasn't living with Batman and didn't have a bedtime, but, well, he was living with Batman now, and he had a bedtime.

"Okay," Tim said aloud, and made a decision. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

He stepped out of line (much to the relief of the French tourists) and headed back to the crosswalk. This time, he lingered at the back of the crowd that had accumulated to wait for the signal, and he dragged his feet to make sure he was one of the last through the intersection. Then, when no one else was near him, he pretended to notice the

envelope for the first time and crouched in the middle of the street to pick it up.

“Let’s go, kid, hurry up,” called the cop from a few paces away. (Because *of course* he noticed something likely to inconvenience him.)

“Sorry, Officer,” said Tim, pitching his voice higher, knowing that, along with his short stature, he could pass for younger than fifteen when he needed to. “Um, I think you dropped this,” he added, holding out the envelope.

“What?” said the cop, not taking it. “Come on, the light’s changing.”

(Oh, for fuck’s— this should not *be this hard!)*

“It says GCPD on it,” Tim insisted, keeping his face and tone as neutral as possible. “It’s for you.”

“Oh,” the cop said, reaching for the envelope at last. “Sure. Whatever, kid. Just get on the sidewalk before you get hit by a car and I lose my job, okay?”

“Okay,” Tim said with a nod and hurried across the street.

On his way to the bus stop, he glanced over his shoulder. The cop was pulling his hand out of his pocket, and the envelope was no longer in sight. Tim breathed a sigh of relief and double-timed it to the bus stop, because, given the luck he was having today, the damn thing would be early, and he’d miss it anyway.

Mission accomplished, he supposed, as he boarded the bus a few minutes later and returned to the library. Tim had done his part. Now he just had to hope that the cop remembered that he had the photos... preferably *before* he washed his uniform pants with the envelope still in the pocket.

Bruce hefted his briefcase, patted his pockets—car keys, wallet, phone, multi-tool, emergency beacon, penlight—and reached for the door handle. He hit the light switch with his free hand, then stepped out into the hall. The executive suite was quiet, with only a low hum of chatter and activity from the other offices— typical for a Monday afternoon.

Samantha was at her desk, placing the phone back in its cradle. She had a worried look on her face, but she jolted upright and gave him a

falsely bright smile when she saw him.

“Oh, hello, Mr. W— Bruce,” she said.

“Better,” Bruce commented with a smile, because he’d gently told her at her six-month review a few weeks ago that only strangers called him ‘Mr. Wayne’.

Samantha huffed, her cheeks going pink. “I’m trying,” she said. “Are you heading out?”

“I am,” Bruce replied. “Going to pick Tim up from swimming, then head home.”

“Ah,” said Samantha. Her worried look was back, but she was still (very obviously) trying to hide it from him. “Okay, then. Have a good night.”

“Thanks.” Bruce waited a beat, but when she didn’t speak, he asked, “Do you need anything from me before I go?”

“Um,” Samantha said, then she shook her head. “No, actually, it’s okay. I think this can wait until morning.”

“Sam,” said Bruce, because *she’d* told *him* at her six-month review a few weeks ago that only strangers called her ‘Samantha’, and he was trying, too. “What is it?”

Sam’s smile took on an embarrassed twist. “Oh, nothing. We’re probably making a big deal out of nothing. I’m sure you don’t need to worry.”

Warning bells were sounding in his head, but Bruce’s expression didn’t change. “Well, now I’m definitely gonna worry,” he said, in that smooth, charming tone that always made people relax.

Sam wasn’t immune to it. Her fake smile dropped away completely. “Okay, so you know how you asked me this morning to reach out to Dr. Marcus at the biomedical lab?”

“Yes. Did he call back?”

“No,” said Sam, and she hesitated. “I— we can’t seem to reach him.”

Bruce noted that she’d said *we* again. “What do you mean?”

She blew out a breath and launched into an explanation. “Well, I

called Joanna over at the lab, and asked her when Dr. Marcus was coming in, and she said she'd call back when he got there. But then she didn't call, so around lunchtime I thought, well, maybe she got busy and forgot, so I called again, but he still wasn't there. And he was supposed to be off-site visiting a clinic in the Tricorner area this morning, so Joanna didn't worry. She thought maybe he just got held up there. But they just called her to reschedule because I guess he never showed up for the meeting."

Bruce blinked, taking a second to process this wall of words. "AJ's missing?" he summarized.

"I don't know about that," said Sam, but she wrung her hands. "I mean, *missing* might be a bit much, but—"

"But if he's not where he's supposed to be, and nobody knows where he is, then what else do we call it?" Bruce concluded. Sam considered this, and nodded.

"What do you think we should do?" she asked. "Joanna said maybe we could call the police for a welfare check? She said HR can get them the address."

"Has anyone been to his house?" Bruce countered. "Maybe he got sick, or hurt himself somehow and wasn't able to call in. Maybe we should do that before we contact the authorities, just to rule out the obvious."

Sam lit up at the idea. "Good thinking," she said, picking up the phone again. "Let me ask Joanna, maybe she can send someone."

"I know where he lives, I can go," Bruce volunteered, but Sam shook her head.

"I think we can find someone other than *you* to— oh, hi Jo, it's Sam again," she interrupted herself.

Bruce set his briefcase down beside Sam's desk and pulled his phone out of his pocket. He opened the messaging app, thinking, *If Jason can get downstairs and hop on the Batcomputer—*

Then he froze.

He'd... *forgotten.* That had never— he had *never* just—

But he had. For a fraction of a second, he'd been sure that, when he texted, Jason would answer. Bruce had been positive. Bruce *knew* that

he'd be at the manor. In his room, or maybe the library. Or helping Alfred in the kitchen. Where else would he be?

For a moment, Bruce wished he could have stayed in that instant before he remembered, when he thought Jason was still alive and safe and home. To know that with such clarity and then have it taken away again felt like being shaken awake from a dream. But at least with a dream, he would know retroactively that he'd been asleep. He would understand that that place of knowledge was outside his present reality.

What had just happened now was... very much not like that. Because here, now, he had forgotten that his son was dead.

It made a sick sort of sense. After all, how many times had he stood in front of his assistant's desk and pulled out his phone to tell Jason he was on his way home, or let him know he'd be working late, or ask if Jason had finished the math homework he'd promised to get through before patrol?

Disoriented, and feeling a little shaky, Bruce reached out a hand to steady himself on Sam's desk. Sam was still talking, but her voice sounded like it was coming from the end of a long, dark hallway.

Did this happen when he lost his parents, he wondered. It must have. He'd been so young— if anything, it probably happened *more.* But, thinking back, he couldn't remember any time in his life when he wasn't actively cognizant of their absence. Just like there wasn't any time in the last nine months that he didn't feel Jason's loss like a crater.

Until that one fraction of second today.

"Wait, you mean they're there *now?"*

The note of alarm in Sam's voice brought Bruce back. He re-focused, absorbing the details: her mouth, tight at the corners and turned down; her thumb, rubbing against the tips of her first two fingers on her right hand; her brow, furrowed low; her eyes, snapping up to meet his when she caught him staring.

"What is it?" he asked her in a low voice.

Sam pulled the receiver slightly away from her mouth as she said, "The police are at the lab. They came before Jo even called them."

Bruce's warning bells were back, loud enough now that they were reverberating the inside of his brain. "Why?"

Sam shrugged and shook her head helplessly, Joanna's voice drawing her attention back to the phone.

"Tell her I'm on my way," Bruce decided. He fired off a quick text to tell Alfred of the change in plans, then strode towards the elevator.

"Mr. Wayne," Samantha protested. "You were gonna go home, I'm sure there's no need to—"

"AJ's a friend," Bruce explained shortly, calling the elevator. It arrived in mere seconds. "I'll keep you posted."

"Yeah, he's heading over," he heard Sam say from behind him. She sighed as he stepped into the elevator. "I know, Jo, I *told* him—"

The doors closed, cutting her off. Bruce looked down at his phone again, relieved to see Alfred's acknowledgement of his message. Then he straightened his shoulders and deliberately thought about nothing except AJ's missing status.

Their plates were barely clear before Bruce stood up from the table and announced that he had to go back to his study because he had work to do.

Alfred wasn't surprised; Bruce had been so distracted throughout the entire meal that he may as well not have been there. In fact, a small, selfish part of Alfred wished he weren't, because his physical presence was taking a toll on Tim, who kept watching Bruce out of the corner of his eye like he was convinced that Bruce was about to snap.

Conversation between them had been short and stilted. Even if Bruce were in a talking mood, the two hardly had a chance to exchange words, since Bruce had changed his plans to pick Tim up from swimming at the last minute and sent Alfred instead. But Bruce had only returned to the manor less than half an hour before Alfred set dinner on the table. He'd made a small effort, at least—which was more than Alfred could say on some occasions, particularly when Dick was Tim's age—but he didn't put on a good show of listening when Tim answered his questions about what he'd done on the weekend without him.

And, curse him, Alfred knew that Tim's somewhat hesitant answers on

that front were his own fault.

Alfred tried to live with few regrets, but he'd accumulated a handful—one for each of his boys, at least. The *Wuthering Heights* Incident, as he'd come to call it in his mind, was just the latest. And no matter how much he'd apologized, or how normal he'd tried to make everything in the aftermath, he knew he would wrestle with his actions on Friday night for a very long time. He'd lost control of the grief that he'd carried for almost a year, and it had rolled like a boulder down a steep incline, flattening everything in its path and frightening the poor lad who stood by and watched.

He ought to tell Bruce. Not all the details, obviously, but he ought to own up, face the shame of it, and prepare him for the consequences. Alfred had been planning to, as soon as Tim was in bed this evening, but then Bruce came home late from the office with obviously a lot on his mind, and Alfred had a new concern to add to his list.

"You didn't tell him, did you?" asked Tim, like he'd read Alfred's thoughts.

Alfred looked over from where he was loading the dishwasher and found that Tim was now watching *him* like he might snap.

"No. And I won't," Alfred promised. Tim nodded, but he bit his bottom lip. "I don't know what's bothering Master Bruce," Alfred added reassuringly. "But I'm positive it has nothing to do with you, or the book that you're reading."

"Yeah," said Tim. He raised a hand to rub at the back of his neck. "Um. About that."

Alfred wiped his hands on a towel. "Yes?" he prompted, when Tim didn't go on.

"Nothing. Never mind," Tim said, and he looked away with a shrug.

Alfred hesitated, wondering if he should push. Then he decided the boy was obviously having a hard enough time at the moment.

"I'm sure he's just concerned about the break-in at Wayne Enterprises on Friday," Alfred said. "I wouldn't worry about it."

"Right," said Tim with another nod. He seemed comforted by this, so Alfred let it go.

“You don’t have to help me clean up, you know,” he said. “If you wish to retire to your bedroom, or go and watch television in the lounge, you can.”

Tim hesitated, then shook his head and picked up the dishcloth to wipe the table. “I don’t mind helping.”

Alfred smiled and went back to the dishwasher.

“Thank you, my dear boy,” Alfred told him fifteen minutes later, when the dishwasher was running, and the pots and pans were scoured and drying in the rack. He turned to face Tim and squared his shoulders, pressing his legs together in a military posture. “I hereby dismiss you from your duties.”

The game dated back to when Dick was young. He’d shared it with Tim a few weeks ago and ‘initiated’ him into the service, but Alfred hadn’t engaged in the game since Friday night, since before the *Wuthering Heights* Incident. It was a relief when Tim’s face split in a grin and he raised one hand to his forehead in a salute so sloppy that it would get him promptly discharged from His Royal Majesty’s service.

“Jolly good,” Tim said, right on cue. The words in an exaggerated American accent never failed to crack Alfred up.

“I’ll check in before bed,” he said, both as a dismissal and as a reminder of the bedtime that Tim sometimes seemed too eager to miss.

Tim nodded and left the kitchen, and Alfred let the smile slowly fade from his face. *That’s one of my boys sorted,* he thought. Now for the other.

He waited a few moments for Tim to get settled, then climbed the stairs as well, bypassing the bedroom hallway to head to Bruce’s study. The door, as he expected, was closed, but when he knocked, Bruce answered.

“I assumed you’d gone downstairs,” Alfred said, once he’d entered and shut the door behind him.

“Not yet,” Bruce replied shortly. He was reviewing something intently on the computer screen. Alfred resisted the impulse to remind him to blink.

“Once Master Tim has gone to bed, then?” he said.

One corner of Bruce’s mouth turned down. He didn’t answer.

“Sooner?” Alfred guessed.

There went the other corner. He just needed the cowl to complete the look.

“What is it, Master Bruce?” Alfred finally asked, after more than a full minute of silence.

“I missed something,” Bruce said, through lips that barely moved. He still hadn’t blinked.

Alfred exhaled a short, silent breath. There was no point to conversation when he got like this, so Alfred rounded the side of the desk to see what was on the screen. To his surprise, Bruce was watching surveillance footage of himself, talking to a security guard and another man who looked vaguely familiar, though Alfred couldn’t place him.

“AJ Marcus,” Bruce said before Alfred could ask. He said the name like it explained everything, but, of course, it didn’t.

“He works for you?” Alfred said. A curt nod was Bruce’s only answer.

Onscreen, the conversation was wrapping up. Bruce and the security guard went one way, Marcus the other. With a few keystrokes, Bruce followed Marcus on the cameras, hopping from one to the next all the way down the hall until Marcus came to the doorway of a tiny, messy office. He didn’t enter. At this point, Bruce switched to a camera inside the office, and Alfred saw why Marcus stayed outside: the door was cordoned off with police tape.

Bruce rewound the footage. Marcus disappeared from the doorway. The room sat empty for several seconds, until a uniformed police officer entered, walking backwards. He was followed—or, preceded, Alfred supposed—by a forensic team. Alfred watched them process the scene with their gadgets and devices. One of them moved up close to the camera, and the screen went abruptly black.

“The camera was disabled during the break-in,” Bruce explained.

The office came back just a second later, with the time stamp in the upper left corner showing a time three hours earlier. Alfred watched

Bruce watch an empty room in high-speed reverse for a few minutes, then Marcus walked backwards into the room, wearing a lab coat that he wouldn't be wearing in a few hours' time.

Finally, Alfred had to say something. "Just how far back are you going? Are you going to watch his entire work week?" he asked dryly.

"If I have to," Bruce replied, unfazed.

Alfred *tsk*ed. "Sir," he began, but Bruce interrupted him.

"He's missing," he said.

"He's— what?" said Alfred, thrown.

"AJ Marcus is missing," Bruce said calmly. "He was there on the night of the break-in, and now he's gone."

"Oh," said Alfred. "Oh, dear."

"GCPD came to the lab this afternoon," Bruce narrated, still in that flat, distracted tone. "We were about to call them for a wellness check, because AJ didn't show up at work today. But the police came before we could, because there'd been a break-in at his house on Saturday, and they just figured out who lived there."

"A break-in at his lab on Friday, and then one at his home just a day later?" said Alfred. "That seems mighty strange."

"Exactly." Bruce didn't take his eyes off the screen for one second. "I missed something."

Alfred took a breath to speak, then reconsidered, then re-reconsidered and said it anyway.

"You're not to blame."

Bruce finally blinked. Just once. Alfred waited, but it didn't happen again. Bruce stayed silent. The video continued to rewind.

"I'll fetch some coffee, shall I?" said Alfred.

Bruce dipped his chin in a short nod.

It was going to be a long night.

Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Batman investigates the missing Wayne Enterprises employee. Or, that's how it starts, anyway.

After less than fifteen minutes, the driver's door opened, and Bullock climbed behind the wheel.

"Detective," Batman said.

Bullock jumped and whirled in his seat. "Je-sus, Bats! I hate it when you do that!"

Chapter Notes

Hi folks!

I've been getting this question in the comments a lot, so I thought I'd address it here once and for all:

Jason is not coming back.

Don't get me wrong, I want him back, too. Jason is my beloved homicidal son. But this story is about the people left behind after he's gone. This story is about loss and grief and trauma and trying to pick yourself up after the worst thing imaginable has happened but the world keeps spinning on. It's about forging new connections and rebuilding a home and learning to trust again in a world that's hurt you. And so, for the story that I am trying to tell, Jason must be dead, and he must stay dead.

And, on that note, we're getting into some pretty heavy Bruce grief content in this chapter and the next, so please take care. (We can have a little *Lonely Place of Dying,* as a treat.)

I will be taking a break after chapter 26 (not this chapter but next chapter), because I need Dick to come back and it always takes me a little bit to figure out how to write him. After next chapter, it's likely that this story won't update until November, since I think I will take a break for Do What I Wantober. It's a great way to stretch my creative muscles and play in some different sandboxes. Maybe I will even write some Jason fics! Who knows? I sure don't. I have no idea what I'm doing most days.

Much love,

—MrsD.

P.S. If you want to read Jason content right now, you can check out my Titans story, The One Who Got Away. Jason recently returned from the dead over there.

Batman approached AJ Marcus' townhouse from the west, dropping onto the roof of a low-rise apartment building wedged between two of Kingston's older brick storefronts. From here, he had a clear view of the dog park, stretching out like a black sea. On its far shore, AJ's home was lit from top to bottom. The shadows of uniformed police officers moved from window to window on both floors. The door was propped open, with two investigators dusting the sides of the knob for fingerprints. The laneway housed their van, and the narrow road that looped behind the townhouses was likewise clogged with GCPD vehicles.

There were no news trucks, however, which was good. AJ's neighbours all seemed to be staying inside with their doors, windows, and curtains closed, which was better. It was also not surprising. Kingston was a largely upper-class residential borough, with good schools and friendly mom-and-pop shops. The people here tended to mind their own business— for good or for ill.

With no real nightlife to speak of, and relatively low crime rates, Batman didn't spend a lot of time here. And he didn't particularly want to be seen here, either. The Batman showing up at what appeared to be a simple break-and-enter in Kingston would raise questions that didn't need to be raised. First, and most obviously, there was the Wayne Enterprises connection. If Batman was seen to be taking a special interest in a break-in at a WE employee's home, that might raise red flags for someone paying close attention to links between Bruce Wayne and Batman.

But also, Batman just didn't want people—ordinary law-abiding citizens such as AJ's neighbours—to see him and be afraid. Despite what some people thought, he didn't always like terrifying everyone who crossed his path. Early in his mission, hellbent on justice and vengeance, he didn't care about that, but he'd changed— thanks in no small part to Dick, whose Robin had brought light and hope into Gotham.

Robin was the one who made Batman approachable. He could go

places that Batman couldn't, could talk to people who'd be too fearful to come to Batman directly. He could step into crime scenes like the one across the street, greet the police with a wave and a smile, and gather as much if not more intelligence than Batman himself, because the police were generally more at ease when Batman wasn't there.

In other words, Robin would be perfect for a mission like this.

Batman found himself smiling, even despite the ache that started in his chest at the reminder that there was no Robin anymore, that Robin was gone. Because he could picture Jason entering the house below.

Well, first he would complain about it. He'd complain because he never got along as well with cops as Dick did— Jason spent too many years on the street to ever fully trust them. Then he'd call it *busywork,* like he said whenever a substitute English teacher made his class freewrite about their weekend plans. Then he'd accuse Bruce of keeping him away from *the real action,* refusing to believe that there wasn't something more exciting happening somewhere else. He was never that keen on the sometimes frustrating legwork that formed the bulk of solving a case. (And he was never shy about sharing that opinion, either.)

But finally, after he got his complaints out, Jason would do it. He would approach the house on foot, in plain sight, because he was always convinced that Robin was supposed to be obvious— bright, eye-catching, distracting. He'd find the ranking officer and wander around the scene with them. Unlike Dick, who often played wide-eyed curiosity to get the police to explain things to him in detail, Jason would surprise them with observant questions and theories about the crime and its perpetrators. He wasn't usually right, but on more than one occasion it worked to get the police to give him their less conventional theories, and, in Gotham, sometimes the right answer was the least conventional one.

Back in the present, Batman sighed, the bitter beginning to outweigh the sweet of his memories. Jason had been a quick, outside-the-box thinker, but *quick* also meant *hasty,* and *outside-the-box* sometimes meant *irrational.* Batman had thought that he had curbed Jason's worst instincts; after all, he'd come so far in the few years that they'd worked together. But Bruce also knew that part of Jason would always and forever be that kid who hit Batman with a tire iron— the kid who acted first and thought second. And that had gotten him killed.

Well, no. Jason's quick, outside-the-box thinking had gotten him to

Ethiopia. *Bruce* had gotten him killed.

Batman forced his brooding thoughts away. Detective Harvey Bullock had just come into view, stepping through the open door to exchange a few words with a pair of uniformed officers. Batman hadn't been sure, before, who was holding this scene, and he was relieved to see a familiar, if not terribly friendly, face.

Keeping his eyes trained on Bullock, he pulled the mini parabolic microphone from his belt. It only took a second to come online, the audio playing directly in the cowl.

"—do it again," Bullock was saying. "It happened in broad fucking daylight, somebody had to have seen something."

"But sir—" one of the officers protested. Bullock cut her off.

"No, no, no. No *but sir,"* he said. "By the end of tomorrow, I want you to have talked to every single person who lives in this row of houses. No excuses."

"What if somebody's not home?" asked the other officer.

"Then you park your little butt outside and you wait for them," Bullock answered, slowly and clearly, like he was talking to a unruly pet. "Got it?"

"Yes, sir," said both officers.

"Good," Bullock said. "Media blackout's in place until 6 tomorrow night, so that's your deadline. Lord knows we're gonna get enough bullshit tips after the story gets out. We need the good stuff now so we at least have a point of comparison."

Batman nodded in silent approval. They may have had their differences over the years, and Bullock was nothing if not an ornery man, but he was a good detective. He knew what he was doing, and he did it, day in and day out. He was one of the hardest working cops on the force, and had been for years.

Batman listened in a moment longer, the back of his mind turning over the problem of how to get Bullock alone without being seen. When Bullock started walking away from the cops and the house, Batman spotted the solution. It was parked along the narrow access road that ran behind the houses.

While Bullock grumbled about having to babysit rookies, Batman moved to the southeast corner of the roof he was on. The park and street below were mostly empty. The southern entrance to the park had a wrought-iron gate over the path— tall and dramatic like so many Gotham landmarks. Just past that path was a structure like a gazebo, designed to offer shade on a hot sunny day. Its shadow was long in the stark orange streetlight— long enough that it almost touched the black sedan that Bullock was now moving towards with his jacket in his hands.

Batman started moving towards it, too. If he got down to the gate, and then moved into the shade of the gazebo—

Something crinkled under his boot. Distracted, he glanced down, expecting a candy bar wrapper or something similar, but instead, it was an origami heart, perhaps 3 inches in diameter, now sporting a partial bootprint but in otherwise good condition. It was clean, not warped or brittle from the sun and rain. It hadn't been here long.

Intrigued, he picked it up. To his surprise, the heart was not made of origami paper, or even construction paper. Instead, it was basic lined white paper— the cheap stuff, from a binder, maybe, or torn from a notebook. Despite the unconventional paper choice, the heart had clearly been made by someone who knew what they were doing. The edges were pristine, with none of the hesitation or re-folds of a learner. This was no child's craft—which would be strange enough to find on a rooftop—but what *was* it?

A tiny mystery, Batman concluded. He made to drop the small paper heart, but reconsidered at the last second and tucked it into one of his belt's many pouches instead. Then he directed his attention back to the original plan.

Less than five minutes later, he was seated in Harvey Bullock's backseat. The jacket that Bullock had deposited a moment ago was in a crumpled, cigarette-smelling heap beside him. Or maybe that was just the smell of the car in general.

He didn't have long to wait. As he guessed from the conversations he'd overheard at the scene, Bullock's part in it was wrapping up, and soon he'd be heading back to the station. Sure enough, after less than fifteen minutes, the driver's door opened, and Bullock climbed behind the wheel.

"Detective," Batman said.

Bullock jumped and whirled in his seat. “Je-*sus,* Bats! I hate it when you do that!”

Batman said nothing. Bullock shook his head.

“And I know you know I hate it when you do that,” he continued, “because I tell you every time you do it, and you fucking do it anyway!”

Batman still stayed silent. Bullock turned back to face the front of the car, but glared at him in the rearview mirror. “One of these days you’re actually gonna give me a heart attack,” he grumbled, picking up his pack of cigarettes from the centre console and shaking one out. While he flicked the lighter, he said, “My blood pressure just can’t take it, Bats.”

“There are other ways to improve your blood pressure, Harvey,” Batman commented, as a cloud of bitter smoke engulfed the driver’s seat.

“Shut it,” was Bullock’s curt reply.

Batman let him smoke in peace, knowing that Bullock would talk once he’d calmed down.

“So, you’re looking for this guy too, huh?” he said, when the cigarette was more than half-gone. “He a victim or a perp?”

Batman didn’t know how to answer that question. The thought *had* occurred to him that the break-in at the lab on Friday might have been an inside job, but once Bruce had seen AJ that night, he’d more or less eliminated him from suspicion. While AJ had seemed a little shaken, nothing about his demeanour or the way he’d answered the police’s questions seemed to suggest that he was involved.

Or maybe Bruce had just wanted to believe that he wasn’t involved.

“Far as we can tell, he left voluntarily,” Bullock went on when Batman didn’t speak. “No sign of a struggle, personal stuff’s gone. Keys, wallet, toothbrush, that kinda thing. And there’s a luggage set in the master bedroom closet with no smallest piece.”

Batman’s mouth tightened. *I missed something.*

“But we know from the damage to the door that the break-in was real,” said Bullock. “And your friend put the date and time on one of

the pictures, so we know it happened in the afternoon on Saturday. But we don't know when the homeowner left, exactly. My guys are canvassing the area, trying to see if one of the neighbours noticed anything that could help us hammer down the timeline. Or," he added bitterly, as he stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray, "my guys are *supposed* to be canvassing the area. I gotta be honest, I'm not sure they know what that word means. How the hell they got outta the academy without knowing—"

"My friend," Batman repeated, cutting off Bullock's tangent. "What do you mean, *my friend?"*

Confused brown eyes met his in the rearview. "You know. Your friend. Your snitch." When Batman gave a minute shake of his head, Bullock turned in his seat again. "Gordon didn't call you?"

"No."

"Then what you are doing here?" Bullock asked.

Batman stayed silent.

"O-kay, never mind," Bullock answered his own question, turning back around. "You were just doing your own thing, checking up on places." He sighed. "Whole lotta city for a bat with no bird. You hold any auditions yet?"

"The snitch, Harvey," Batman reminded him through gritted teeth.

"Alright, alright, keep your bat-shirt on," said Bullock. "Patrol officer in Bristol was handed a package today. Addressed to Gordon. Inside were pictures. Black and white, just like the ones that let us nail the Maronis for that hit on the Falcones."

"Bug," Batman muttered.

"Bless you," said Bullock, like Batman had sneezed. "We were none the wiser that anything happened up here. Quiet street, nobody reported nothing over the weekend. Door's not obvious til you're up close, I guess. And it wasn't like the homeowner was here to notice."

"Do you have the pictures?" Batman asked. Bullock shook his head.

"Gordon's got 'em. Said he was gonna call you." He shrugged. "Guess he got busy."

“Any clues as to his location?”

Bullock looked up at him in the rearview mirror again. “Who, Gordon?”

Batman didn’t dignify that with a response.

“Oh,” said Bullock, catching on. He looked down and away from the mirror, focusing on the view of the townhouse through the windshield. “No. We’re looking. Nothing yet. We went to his work, but he didn’t show up there. Nobody knows where he is. But your friend got a few good pics of the guys who broke in.”

Batman had heard enough. His next stop was Jim Gordon’s office. He needed to see those photos firsthand and get Jim’s thoughts on them.

He silently opened the car door, then slid out and left it open behind him, listening to the rest of what Bullock had to say through a small listening device he deposited on the bottom of the seat.

“We’re going through the mug book, trying to find the perps. Once we figure out who they are, we’ll haul their asses in and see what they know. Not sure whether or not they’re involved, but it’d be a helluva coincidence if they just so happened to break in right around the same time this guy just so happened to go missing, you know?”

A rustle. Bullock must have turned in his seat again. Batman was already on the roof of the gazebo.

“Goddammit,” said Bullock. He raised his voice. “You know I hate it when you do that, too!”

If Batman smirked as his grapnel gun carried him to a rooftop across the street— well. No one could see it.

Despite his shift officially ending more than an hour ago, the Commissioner’s office was still lit, and Jim was still at his desk. He looked up at the tap of Batman’s knuckles against the window. Even from ten feet away, Batman could see the sheen of sweat on his brown skin. But when Batman started to lift the sash, Jim shook his head. Then he raised one hand, one finger, and pointed it towards the ceiling. Batman nodded his understanding and re-climbed the side of the building.

He crossed the roof to the unlit signal. His cape hung heavy behind

him, perfectly still in the muggy night. Overhead, the sky was clear, but with the city's light pollution only a handful of stars were visible. Sounds of traffic and voices filtered up twelve storeys from the street. On a hot night like this, Gothamites rarely went to bed early. Which usually meant—

There it was. The faint patter of gunfire. Much too far away for Batman to intervene. He grimaced, hoping no one was dead, and reminded himself that he couldn't be everywhere at once. His internal voice, as ever, sounded a lot like Alfred when it said things like that.

The roof access door creaked. Batman turned and focused on Jim, who was pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and raising it to mop his brow. In his other hand was a clear plastic evidence bag that held a regular-sized white envelope addressed to him in black block letters.

"Goddamn A/C's broken in the whole building," he said, muffled from behind the handkerchief. "Repairs were supposed to happen this morning, then the guy never showed up. I scraped together enough budget to order window units for most of the offices, but in the meantime, Jesus. I think it's actually cooler up here."

Batman grunted in sympathetic agreement. Jim held out the evidence bag.

"This the package?" Batman asked, taking it.

"Yep. It was given to Officer Stacy in Bristol Central Square late this afternoon, right near the end of his shift."

Batman held the package up and examined the envelope more closely. "Any fingerprints?"

"Other than Stacy's, none that were in our systems."

"So just like the others, then."

"Pretty much." Jim took off his glasses and used one corner of his handkerchief to clean them. "But also not really at all."

Batman considered this and nodded. Broad daylight in an extremely public place... it *was* different. Bug tended to leave things for the GCPD at night, in secluded alleys where trusted detectives were sure to find them.

"I think maybe the Maronis spooked them," said Jim, following

Batman's train of thought exactly. "Too bad they didn't try the remote access thing again. Would've been nice to test out our fancy new system."

Jim, of course, had no idea that his own daughter had been instrumental in the creation of that system, and Batman wasn't going to tell him. "You said someone gave it to Stacy?" said Batman, opening the bag.

Jim nodded. "A kid."

Batman's hands paused, the envelope half-in, half-out of the bag.

"Yeah," said Jim, without Batman even having to say anything. "Stacy says the envelope was sitting in the road. You can see a partial tire track on it, there," he added, pointing. "A kid stopped in the middle of the crosswalk, picked it up, and handed it to him. Stacy took it without really thinking, and only noticed the name and address on it afterwards."

"Hm," said Batman, but he didn't let himself relax just yet. "Tell me about this kid."

Jim exhaled a breath that was almost a laugh. "Figured you'd wanna know. Don't worry, he wasn't hurt. Didn't seem scared, or like somebody had coerced him."

"Homeless?" Batman guessed.

"If so, he didn't look it," Jim replied. "Stacy says he was clean. None of his clothes had any holes or anything, and he just had a small backpack, not like he was camping out somewhere."

"Age?"

"Twelve, maybe? Stacy wasn't too sure."

"Description?"

"White, skinny, dark hair." Jim shrugged. "Stacy says he looked just like a regular kid. Nothing really stood out about him at all."

"Was he alone?"

"No," Jim answered swiftly. "He was with a crowd of tourists."

Batman finally let some of the tension drop out of his shoulders.

“Tourists,” he repeated. “Any accent?”

“Stacy didn’t say anything about that,” Jim replied, in a tone that meant he hadn’t asked. “But he also said it was kinda hard to hear the kid over the traffic and all.”

“I see,” said Batman. “So, Bug left the package near Officer Stacy, and this kid just happened to come across it and pick it up before he noticed it himself.”

“Sure seems that way,” Jim agreed. “We could check traffic cams and private surveillance to see if we caught the interaction, but it’s a long shot. Stacy was in kind of a blind spot; that’s why had an officer there in the first place.”

Batman nodded and finished taking the envelope out of the bag. Inside were five photographs, all black and white, just like the ones that had helped to prosecute Maroni’s lieutenant for that hit on a Falcone runner a few months back. Like those photos, these told a short story with an impressive amount of detail.

The first showed two men from behind, fiddling with AJ’s door. One held a crowbar down at his side. In the next, the shorter of the two men was using the crowbar to pry at the doorjamb while the other kept a lookout, obviously unaware that he was already being filmed. The lower half of his face was covered with a scarf. In the third photo, he raised a hand to scratch his eyebrow, revealing a tattoo just above the knuckle on his right pointer finger. Batman held the image up to his eyes, but he couldn’t get a clear idea of what the tattoo was.

“We’re running that through enhancement software,” said Jim. “Hopefully the tattoo is unique enough that we can get a lead.”

Batman shifted that photo to the back of the pile and looked at the next. Under the cowl, his eyebrows shot up. Bug had managed to capture the moment that the short, stocky robber lowered his scarf to wipe sweat from his skin, revealing most of his face, clear as day.

“Yeah, that’s the money shot,” Jim commented. “We set up facial recognition software to try and get a match in the database, but I’ve also got officers going through our physical mug book, just in case.”

“Hm,” said Batman, moving on. The last photo in the envelope showed the backs of the men again, as they went inside AJ’s house.

“Flip it over,” said Jim.

He did. AJ's address was printed on the back of the last picture, in the same block letters as on the front of the envelope. And, as Bullock had told him, Saturday's date and the time—2:46PM—was written there as well.

"As soon as I saw the address I sent a squad car right away," Jim recounted. "And, Harvey probably already told you, but the place was empty. We did a little digging. Turns out nobody's seen the homeowner since Saturday morning."

So I wasn't the last one to see him, Bruce thought, with more relief than he was expecting.

"You don't recognize either of these guys, do you?" Jim asked.

"Not off-hand, no," said Batman.

"Heard any rumours about anyone looking for out-of-town talent?"

"No."

"Okay." Jim nodded, but his eyes were focused on the skyline— a sign both that he had more to say and that he thought Batman wouldn't like hearing it. "But also... you haven't been around as much lately."

Batman scowled as he put the photos into their envelope, placed the envelope back in the evidence bag, and handed it over to Jim. The embedded accusation was no worse than those he'd thrown at himself in the last few hours—*I missed something*—but it stung more, coming from Jim.

"I just mean," Jim fumbled on, clearly reading Batman's mood again, "Nightwing's been answering a lot of calls these days, and ever since Robin—"

Batman dove off the side of the roof.

Jim's words played in his head as he moved through the city— street by street, rooftop by rooftop, crime by crime.

You haven't been around as much lately.

He stopped a purse snatcher in Little Japan, broke the nose of a window-breaker in the Diamond District, interrupted a kidnapping by the docks. Ten guys, six with guns, and none of them left standing by the time Batman was done.

The would-be victim ran off, terrified. Batman grappled up to one of the gargoyles on the Waterfront Market building and used thermal imaging to locate her before signaling the GCPD.

You haven't been around as much lately.

Gang members hassling a homeless encampment. Young women threatening a liquor store clerk with machetes. Cab driver carjacked at gunpoint. Again and again, Batman swooped in, stopped the crime and punished the perpetrators, then took off for the next call.

The night grew old; he didn't tire. Alfred did. Batman told him to sign off. He said that he'd be returning to the Cave soon.

He lied.

You haven't been around as much lately.

A pair of thugs in two-toned masks casing a bank. Four women in green leaving seed packets outside an oil company's headquarters in the Financial District. Sixteen men in clown masks laughing about how easy it would be to break into Arkham and bring the boss home.

At 3:57, Bruce Wayne's cell phone rang.

He barely heard it over the sound of screaming as he dislocated a clown's shoulder. The crowbar the clown had been holding hit the pavement with a clatter, and it took everything in him to leave it where it lay and finish the fight with his fists.

He was in an empty alley when the ringing started again inside the cowl. He blinked, looked down. His gauntlets were spotted with blood. He was pretty sure it wasn't his.

Sirens. He raised a hand that hurt (he didn't know why) and fired his grapnel gun. He watched with blurred vision as a GCPD patrol car stopped in the alley below. Officers moved like carpenter ants.

He blinked, and the ants had multiplied. Not just cops now, paramedics too. The reflective bands on their uniforms lit up the night. And in the distance, that strange, artificially happy music started up once again.

Probably Alfred, he thought, as the ringtone looped. *He'll give up soon, and he'll be right to.*

Then a memory broke through the fog:

If you need me for anything, you can call me. Any time.

I will.

Bruce gasped and shook himself. He raised a bloody gauntlet to take the call through the cowl.

“Hello?” he said. Raspy. He hadn’t spoken aloud since he’d left Gordon on the roof of the GCPD building.

“Ah, there you are at last, Master Bruce,” said Alfred. Only someone who knew him well would hear the genuine relief in his exaggerated pleasant tone.

Alfred paused like Bruce was saying something, then went on.

“Yes, well, I’m terribly sorry to take you away from the after-party, sir. I trust you and Miss Lavender are enjoying yourselves?”

He enunciated the phony name clearly. Bruce understood at once, and pushed himself into motion.

“Oh, that’s splendid,” said Alfred after another silent beat. “Will you require transportation?”

“No,” Bruce answered curtly.

“Very good, sir. Please do tell her that I’ve found the diamond earring she was missing just before you left this evening.”

Bruce had no idea what Alfred was talking about. It didn’t matter. He’d reached the rooftop above where the car was parked. He scanned the alley to be sure it was empty, then dropped down beside the Batmobile.

“Is Tim okay?” he asked, once he was behind the wheel.

“Yes, I assure you,” came the prompt reply. “Pity that Miss Lavender will be unable to join us for breakfast.”

“I’m on my way,” Bruce said as he started the engine, because Alfred had repeated the codeword.

“Ah, well, we can have it couriered to her, if you’re certain she won’t want to see you again.”

Bruce just grunted. “Twenty minutes,” he said.

“See you shortly, sir.”

Alfred disconnected, and Bruce let the Batmobile’s autopilot carry him through the empty streets. It was the quietest time of night, even in Gotham, even in the summer.

He tugged off his gauntlets one at a time. The right was a little harder to remove than the left. He tossed both on the vacant passenger seat beside him. Next came the catch at the back of the cowl, and the hidden cape fastener at the base of his throat. With the release came a metallic whiff of sweat and blood. The cowl went onto the passenger seat, too, while the cape slid down to pool at the small of his back.

His right hand was still hurting. He glanced at his bare skin and found it swollen, discoloured. He’d sprained his fourth and fifth fingers, perhaps even fractured one of them. He rested his wrists on the steering wheel and he probed the sore spots carefully. The bones seemed to be intact, but it would be wise to have an x-ray just in case.

His head was clearing, and while fatigue was setting in, he felt himself coming back. From where—or *what*—he wasn’t sure, and, while he had the distinct impression that he should worry more about that, he also knew that he couldn’t afford to. Some nights were just a dance with darkness.

But soon the sun would rise. He glanced at the time as he drove over the bridge. Now that he could focus a little more, he replayed the conversation with Alfred in his head, turning over the words, searching for clues.

Miss Lavender was clear enough. *Code Lavender* meant that something serious but non-life-threatening had come up, and he had to return to the manor at once, via the front door, in civilian attire.

But what could have happened to trigger a Code Lavender at 4 in the morning?

The most obvious element of the conversation hit him a moment later as the car pulled into the empty Cave. In past instances of a Code Lavender, Alfred would just say so directly, over the comm. But tonight, he’d called Bruce’s civilian cell phone to have a fake conversation and worked the codeword into a sentence. There was only one reason he would do this: he couldn’t get the Cave to use the comm. And the only reason for *that* would be if someone who didn’t

know about Batman was with him.

Tim was the most likely candidate. Maybe he'd woken in the night from another nightmare, or maybe he was sick? But Alfred had said he was fine. Maybe Dick had come over, and Tim was in the room as well, so Alfred had to speak in code. But what would make Alfred unwilling to leave Dick or Tim's side? Dammit, he should have asked if Dick was alright, too.

He climbed out of the car and finished removing the Batsuit. He took a quick shower, then spritzed some cologne on his bare chest before reaching for the tuxedo he kept at the ready down here for situations just like this. Thankfully, Alfred had made it clear to whoever was listening in on their conversation that Bruce had been at a party for hours, so if he looked a little dishevelled, it actually worked in his favour. He left his bowtie loose and purposefully added some wrinkles to the pants and collared shirt.

While he fastened his cuff links—his left was challenging, with the injury to his right hand—another detail of his conversation with Alfred came back to him: Miss Lavender's diamond earring. What had Alfred been trying to say? There was no such thing as a Code Diamond; why create a story that he'd found a diamond earring?

No, Bruce remembered, it wasn't just that he'd found *a* diamond earring— it was that he'd found *the diamond earring that had been missing.* That last part seemed important. What had Bruce been missing before he left? He wasn't sure. It was hours ago that he left the manor to investigate the break-in at AJ's townhouse.

Well. AJ was missing.

Maybe the police had come to the manor with news, he thought, tying only one of his shoes when his hand hurt too much to do both. But that didn't make sense. If there'd been a break in the case, why would the GCPD come to Bruce first, of all people? They'd go to AJ's next of kin, surely.

Maybe it was someone from Wayne Enterprises? Bruce got behind the wheel of a different car, started the engine and drove out of the Cave, then up the hill to the long winding lane that led to the manor's front door. Maybe the person actually responsible for Friday's break-in had had a crisis of conscience and came to the CEO's house to confess in the middle of the night. That seemed like a long shot... but it was possible, he supposed.

He parked the car and climbed out, sauntering towards the main entrance, Alfred's words still echoing in his mind.

The diamond earring she was missing.

She was missing.

Missing.

Or maybe—

He opened the front door and was met by Alfred. A familiar face hovered over his shoulder.

—it was AJ himself.

Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

The Dark Knight's dark night continues.

"Sorry for taking you away from your party," said AJ.

Bruce waved his uninjured hand dismissively. "I'd been there all night anyway."

AJ chuckled. "Getting dull, was it?"

Bruce's mouth curled like a smile, though his chest ached. "Something like that."

Chapter Notes

In case it wasn't obvious already, consider this your reminder that Bruce is not okay. He's doing his best, and his best is pretty damn good—probably better than a lot of other people's—but he's still not okay.

Another reminder that I will be on hiatus after this chapter. I am hoping to return in November, but in the meantime I will be participating in my homemade October prompt challenge: Do What I Wantober. You can find out more about that on my Tumblr, if you are curious.

Tim woke in the pitch-dark to the repeated chime of the manor's doorbell.

He sat up, heart pounding in his chest, and listened to the quick shuffle of footsteps down the stairs that followed. After a second, curiosity won out over fear, and he poked his head out into the hallway just in time to catch a glimpse of Alfred as he turned at the bottom of the staircase— to the right, towards the main front door in the manor's public wing. Tim turned the other way then, expecting Bruce to emerge from his bedroom at the end of the hall any second... but he didn't.

Tim began to worry then, and he worried more when Alfred came back. Tim withdrew, but Alfred even didn't seem to notice he was awake, striding past Tim's bedroom to knock on Bruce's door. Tim listened closely, but there was no response to Alfred's knock. A soft

creak told Tim that Alfred had given up and entered the room, and when he passed by alone a moment later, a cold, barely-there trickle of fear ran down Tim's spine. The manor felt... vulnerable without Bruce here, especially at night.

He waited until Alfred's footsteps faded, then snuck out for another look. There was a second person at the bottom of the stairs now— a stranger with a short Afro and light brown skin, wearing a button-down t-shirt and dark blue jeans. His arms were peppered with tattoos, but Tim was too far away to make any of them out.

"Come along into the kitchen, Dr. Marcus. I'll make us some tea while I phone Master Bruce," Alfred said.

"You don't have to do that," said the stranger. "I can just go."

"Don't be silly," Alfred replied, his voice fading. Tim took a chance and went to the top of the stairs to hear the rest. "It is high time that he returned home anyway. These after-after-*after* parties are a bit much, even for him."

"Okay," said the stranger—said Dr. Marcus—doubtfully, starting to follow. Then his eyes darted up and landed directly on Tim.

Tim's apprehension disappeared the second he saw that Dr. Marcus looked even more scared than him. It also looked like he might have been crying recently. Tim knew then that, whoever this man was, he meant no harm. He'd come here in the middle of the night looking for help— and from Bruce Wayne, no less. Not Batman.

Dr. Marcus' mouth had dropped open, and Tim watched him consider saying something to Alfred, then decide not to. Tim tried to give him an encouraging little smile, which Dr. Marcus tried to return before finally following Alfred through to the kitchen.

Tim went back into his room, pushing the door almost closed the way he kept it when he was sleeping. He stood in the dark for a few seconds, contemplating his next move. He was curious about what had brought Dr. Marcus to the manor—and what was keeping Batman out so late—but he was also tired, drained from the rush of adrenaline that had woken him up.

The curiosity won out again, and he turned on his lamp at its lowest setting before bringing his laptop into bed with him. He couldn't find much to explain Bruce's absence—no villain was holding the city hostage, thankfully—but a quick search told him that Dr. Marcus

worked for Wayne Enterprises' biomedical division, where he headed up a lab— the same lab, it seemed, that had been broken into on Friday night.

Reports about that crime were limited, so Tim decided to investigate the doctor himself. It seemed like he mostly worked on cancer research, trying to develop new therapies. He did a little more digging and found one of Dr. Marcus' published papers. He opened it, excited to read more.

Unfortunately, he nodded off in the middle of the second page.

Bruce watched AJ's hands tremble as he raised a second cup of chamomile tea to his lips. Alfred had left them with the pot and excused himself from the sitting room a few minutes ago, but AJ— despite promising in the foyer that he'd explain why he'd come— hadn't yet said a word.

"AJ, what happened?" Bruce finally asked, wrapping his left hand around the handle of his own cup. His injured right hand stayed in his pocket. "We've been worried."

"I know," AJ replied. "My brother said he'd reported me missing."

"Do the police know you're safe?"

"Not yet. I'm... not, yet."

Bruce waited for an explanation. The saucer rattled as AJ put the cup down on it.

"I'm sorry to cause so much trouble," he said. "And I'm sorry for barging in on you like this, Mr. Wayne."

"AJ," Bruce chided gently. "We're long past 'Mr. Wayne' by now, don't you think?"

AJ flushed, his light brown cheeks glowing faintly pink. "Yeah," he said with a sigh. "Yeah, Bruce, I— I know."

"Just tell me what happened," said Bruce, when another moment passed in silence. "Where have you been?"

"I went to my ex-boyfriend's place upstate," AJ admitted. "I just... with the break-in at the lab, and then at my house, I had to get away. And Blair, he's always made me feel safe. Safer than here, anyway."

“Here, as in Gotham?”

AJ nodded. Bruce could tell there was more to it than just the break-ins, but when AJ stayed silent, he decided to give him a little push.

“AJ, you’ve lived here your whole life,” he said lightly. “No offence, but I wouldn’t think you’d be so spooked by a break-in.”

“I’m...” AJ sighed again. “Look, Bruce, I came to you because we’re friends, but also, you’re my boss. And, as my boss, there’s something you need to know.”

Bruce nodded, and waited for him to gather his thoughts.

“A few weeks ago, I got a job offer from LexCorp. I didn’t apply for it,” he added quickly, obviously misinterpreting Bruce’s look of surprise. “They came to me unsolicited. Said they were familiar with my work and asked if I was looking for a change. They... they need someone to fill a lead position at a lab in Metropolis.”

Bruce chose his next words carefully. “Is this to replace that scientist who died in a car crash a few months back?”

AJ’s reaction surprised him. His eyes welled up with tears and he nodded. Before he spoke again, he reached for his teacup, and his hands shook worse than ever.

“Michaela was a friend,” he said. “I... haven’t been doing too well since she died, actually.”

“Oh. I’m sorry,” said Bruce with genuine empathy. “I didn’t know there was a connection there.”

AJ shrugged one shoulder and put down his tea. “We met overseas when we were students working with a humanitarian relief organization. I... kinda fell in love with her, to be honest,” he admitted with a sad smile. “But she didn’t have the time, and neither did I, really, so we just stayed friends. Kept in touch all these years. Worked together on a few papers, went to the same conferences, that kind of thing.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” said Bruce, utterly inadequately.

“Thank you. But there’s another reason I haven’t been doing so good.” AJ swallowed hard. “She... she called me, Bruce,” he said. His voice barely rose above a whisper, and every word seemed to cost him

dearly. “The night she died. She called me at 3 in the morning. I— I was asleep, I didn’t pick up. She left a message. I didn’t... I haven’t told anybody that.”

A million questions sparked to life in Bruce’s mind. Dr. Michaela Rota was last seen at 12:30, but an anonymous eyewitness placed her car on the Kane Bridge around 4. It had disappeared by morning rush hour. A call to AJ at 3 meant that she was still alive then, which narrowed the window of opportunity considerably.

AJ swiped his hands under his eyes. The freckled skin of his cheekbones shone for a few seconds before his tears evaporated.

“She told me the people who worked for her kept dying,” AJ went on. “And she told me LexCorp was responsible, and they were covering it up. And then she said the Falcones were involved.”

“Falcone? The crime family?” said Bruce, feigning more surprise than he felt.

AJ nodded. “It was the last thing she said before the call cut out. I tried to phone her back at 6 when I woke up, but I couldn’t get through. I texted, I called again... nothing. Then I saw the news a few days later.”

Bruce nodded. The family had, against the GCPD’s suggestion, gone public three days after filing a missing persons report. The news coverage gave rise to the anonymous tip about her car, but little else. Unfortunately.

“AJ,” Bruce said gently. “You need to take this information to the police.”

“I know,” said AJ. “I’ve known that since she died. But this is big, Bruce. If she thought LexCorp was killing her people, and then she herself died? That’s one hell of a big whistle to blow.”

“Yeah,” Bruce agreed. He was desperate to get his hands on the voicemail, to know what evidence (if any) Dr. Rota had to suggest that LexCorp was to blame. But he couldn’t say that, of course, so he didn’t say anything.

“And they obviously know who I am, since they offered me a job,” AJ continued. “They know I knew her, I even helped her brainstorm the idea for the generator—”

“Generator?” Bruce repeated, but AJ didn’t seem to hear.

“—so maybe they know about the phone call, too. I can’t help but think... maybe the job was a peace offering, a bribe to get me to stay quiet.”

“You don’t know that,” Bruce reminded him.

“I turned them down, I thought I was okay,” said AJ. “Then the lab got broken into, and the next day while I was out for lunch, somebody busted into my place and ransacked it. I— I panicked. I ran, I didn’t know what else to do. I couldn’t go to the cops. What if the cop I talked to was on Falcone’s payroll? I know the rumours just as well as anybody else. Like you said, I’ve lived in Gotham my whole life. If they want me gone, I... maybe I should have just stayed upstate,” he concluded miserably.

“No,” Bruce told him, firm but kind. His tone seemed to give AJ pause, slowing his panic a little. “You did the right thing, AJ. I’m going to help you.”

AJ blinked. “How?”

“I have some contacts in the GCPD— people I know and trust,” Bruce explained. “I’ll reach out, get someone to come to the manor and take your statement. Do you still have the voicemail from Dr. Rota? I’m sure the detectives will want to hear it.”

“Yeah,” AJ said with a nod. “I backed it up to my computer. Thank god I brought my laptop with me on Saturday.”

“Good.” Bruce sat up straighter, then decided to just get directly to his feet. “You’ll be safe here tonight,” he said, “and for as long as you need. I promise.”

“Bruce, you don’t need to—” AJ began, but Bruce cut him off.

“I’m sure Alfred’s already made up one of the guest rooms for you,” he said. “Get some sleep, and we’ll sort this out after the sun’s up, okay?”

“I... okay,” said AJ, rising as well. His eyes were misty again, but he seemed steady on his feet at least. “Thank you, Bruce.”

“It’s no trouble, AJ,” Bruce replied, leading the way out of the room. He spotted Alfred down the hall, outside the nicest guest room on the main floor, right where Bruce thought he would be.

“Well, goodnight,” AJ said a little awkwardly when they’d reached him. “Sorry for taking you away from your party.”

Bruce waved his uninjured hand dismissively. “I’d been there all night anyway.”

AJ chuckled. “Getting dull, was it?”

Bruce’s mouth curled like a smile, though his chest ached. “Something like that.”

Once he was certain that their unexpected visitor had everything he needed—mostly a bed, as the poor man was clearly exhausted—Alfred went upstairs in search of Bruce. As anticipated, the door to his study was closed, and there was no reply when he knocked. Alfred suppressed a sigh and went inside. He walked straight to the clock, set the hands, and entered the hidden passageway.

He wasn’t too proud to take the elevator downstairs tonight. He’d only gotten a few hours of sleep before being awoken by the frantic ringing of the doorbell. The worry that followed when he realized that Bruce hadn’t yet returned from patrol, which then turned into fear during those awful twenty minutes when he could only contact him via civilian methods and wasn’t able to reach him— well. In short, Alfred was exhausted, too.

Bruce was at the computer, typing awkwardly with an untreated injury to his right hand. His body and face looked tired, but his eyes were animated, re-energized by the break in his case that Alfred would guess had come from his interview with Dr. Marcus upstairs. At least he’d taken off that poor bedraggled tuxedo, Alfred thought. Or— most of it, anyway. His white shirt hung open over an undershirt, and he was still wearing the wrinkled pants and shiny shoes. The right one was still untied. The navy blue jacket and bow tie were draped over a workbench, abandoned next to a handful of smoke bombs and a teetering pile of scuffed batarangs that needed sharpening— the only evidence, other than Bruce’s injury, of tonight’s hours-long crusade.

Alfred pursed his lips but collected the jacket and tie without a word, taking them to the garment bag that lay in a crumpled heap on the floor near the showers. He left the bag half-zipped and returned to the Cave’s main area, intending to tell Bruce to finish changing fully, so he could take the rest of the tux to be dry-cleaned. But the words got stuck in his throat when Bruce swivelled in his chair, and Alfred noticed the small spots of red dotting the white undershirt.

“Master Bruce,” Alfred said in a certain tone of voice, and he’d lying if he didn’t admit to a small sense of satisfaction when Bruce jumped slightly. “You’re injured.”

Bruce extended his right hand. The fourth and fifth finger were resting in a strange position and mottled with bruises that were much uglier than what Alfred had noticed before. Bruce must have been hiding the severity of it upstairs, he realized with a wave of frustrated annoyance.

“Not serious,” Bruce said, and went back to the computer.

Alfred set his jaw and marched over. He grabbed Bruce’s forearm, fully aware of what Bruce could do to someone who laid a hand on him without permission. But Alfred was fed up and didn’t care.

“*Yes,* serious,” he said. “Medbay. Now.”

“Alfred,” Bruce protested, even as he got to his feet.

Alfred didn’t let him go, and it was a good thing, too, because he stumbled slightly. One of the tiny red dots on his torso grew by a few millimetres with the movement.

“I’m fine,” Bruce said, adding something about blood sugar under his breath.

Alfred pressed his lips together and said nothing. Instead, he just tightened his grip, giving Bruce an anchor while he steadied himself, then led him to the medbay in the corner. Bruce protested when Alfred tried to push him onto a cot, however, choosing to sit of his own accord.

“You don’t need to fuss,” he said. Alfred ignored him.

“Stay put,” he ordered, and went to fetch a protein bar and electrolyte drink from the supply cupboard. He took a suture kit, too, just in case, and wheeled over the small portable x-ray unit.

“Shirt off,” he said when he returned, setting the supplies down beside Bruce on the cot.

“For my fingers?” said Bruce, and Alfred felt a renewed wave of worry. It’d been months since Bruce had had a night like this.

“Come on,” was all Alfred said, opening the electrolyte drink for him

and pressing it into his good hand once it was free of its sleeve.

It was a relief when Bruce raised the bottle to his lips and winced. Alfred had feared this would turn into one of those dead-eyed nights where he didn't seem to feel pain at all. And if tonight was one of those nights, no doubt tomorrow would be too, and the next night, and the next, until he finally broke.

"Oh," Bruce said faintly when he looked down to see what had hurt him. There were half-a-dozen red spots on the white cotton, but only one that caused Alfred any real concern. He raised the bottom of Bruce's undershirt and noticed the fabric sticking. The wound was small enough that it had clotted prior to bleeding anew. Bruce hissed through his teeth as Alfred carefully peeled the cloth away.

"Serrated blade?" Alfred guessed, noting the wound's ragged edges.

"Looks like it," said Bruce, and Alfred raised his head sharply.

"You don't remember?"

Bruce carefully didn't meet his eye as he shrugged. Alfred exhaled through his nose and reached for the kit. He focused on the task as a series of smaller actions: gloves, antiseptic, anaesthetic. Close the wound. Gauze. Tape.

Then he looked for the other spots of red, which were minor scrapes. The suit had clearly taken the brunt of Bruce's collisions with various sharp weapons tonight. And not-sharp weapons, too: there were several bruises across his torso, shoulders, and back.

Alfred cleaned the scrapes and bandaged a couple that needed it. He daubed witch hazel on the larger bruises. Bruce didn't speak, didn't explain what had resulted in his staying out so late and coming home so hurt, but Alfred wasn't expecting that. It was enough that he was home now and letting Alfred do this.

"Alright, now the fingers," he said finally, stripping off his nitrile gloves and disposing of them. Bruce nodded and shifted on the cot, extending his right hand while he continued to eat the protein bar with his left.

Gently, Alfred palpated the fourth and fifth fingers. Bruce didn't react at all, which, ordinarily, Alfred would take as a good sign, but Bruce hadn't noticed he was bleeding, so Alfred wasn't taking any chances tonight. He prepped the machine and ran the x-rays in silence. Once

the images had populated the screen, Alfred went back to the cupboard to fetch a finger splint.

“It’s actually broken?” Bruce said once he’d returned. He was experimenting with moving the finger in question—the fourth one—and Alfred *tsk*ed.

“Stop that,” he said. “And yes. A small, simple fracture in the middle phalanx. Should heal in five or six weeks, assuming you rest it and don’t take any unnecessary risks.”

From the twist of Bruce’s mouth, he clearly caught the emphasis on those last three words. He still didn’t offer an explanation, however.

“You’ll have to come up with a story for Master Tim,” Alfred added, and he watched as the last traces of Batman faded from Bruce’s face. It was like the tide going out— it would be back, of course, but for now the shore was dry.

“He is very observant,” Bruce commented.

“The lad doesn’t miss a beat,” Alfred agreed. He paused. “And he worries about you.”

Bruce went still. Alfred continued to fasten the splint.

“I heard movement from his bedroom when I went upstairs to try and find you,” he went on. “It would be good if you could check on him before turning in yourself.”

Slowly, Bruce nodded. He seemed to start breathing again. “I picked up the phone,” he began, but his voice faltered, and he shook his head. “I thought the Code Lavender had something to do with him.”

“Not this time,” Alfred reassured him.

Bruce closed his eyes, though due to relief or fatigue, Alfred couldn’t tell. Alfred finished the splint, then got to his feet and put the supplies away as quietly as possible. He gathered up Bruce’s white collared shirt, as well as the protein bar wrapper and empty bottle, then took the liberty of turning off the Batcomputer and most of the lights before returning to the medbay.

“Come along now, Master Bruce,” he said softly, laying a land on Bruce’s shoulder.

Bruce stirred and, with his eyes still closed, he patted Alfred's hand. The splint made the touch a little clunky, but no less welcome.

They both took the elevator upstairs tonight.

Tim was jarred awake by the sound of a far-off door closing and voices— familiar, this time. The tight knot in the centre of his chest loosened. Bruce was finally home.

Tim closed his laptop and set it off to the side, then turned out the lamp and sank down onto his pillow. He wondered *how* Bruce came home tonight. Tim had been curious for a while about whether or not Batman's HQ was hidden somewhere in the manor. Probably not, Tim reasoned sleepily. It would be smarter *not* to operate from his own home. Or maybe Batman had an HQ here *and* also somewhere else in the city. If Tim was Batman, he'd spread out his bases and create safe houses all over the city stocked with supplies and equipment. He dozed off thinking about how it would only make sense for Bruce to do the same.

A creak in the floorboards made him open his eyes some indeterminate amount of time later. Bruce was a shadow just outside his door, but he didn't stay that way for long, nudging the door open a little awkwardly, letting in some more light from the hallway. Clearly seeing that Tim was awake, he took a step inside, but didn't come any closer until Tim sat up against the headboard and shuffled over to make room.

Bruce took this as the invitation it was and sat on the edge of the mattress, close enough that Tim caught a whiff of a familiar astringent scent— witch hazel, he thought, remembering the one and only time he painted his nails and a tiny drop of polish landed on the couch. He hadn't thought to buy any nail polish remover, so, in desperation, he tried nearly every bottle in the bathroom to get it out of the upholstery. (He ended up just moving the cushions around, and, to his knowledge, his parents never found out.)

"Hey, bud," Bruce said in a quiet rasp. His shoulders were slumped. "Did we wake you?"

"The doorbell did," Tim admitted. "I've been kinda drifting ever since."

He watched Bruce clock the laptop sitting on the mattress to Tim's left, but all he said was, "Sorry about that."

“Everything alright?” Tim asked.

“Yeah,” said Bruce with a tired nod. “Just work stuff.”

Actual work stuff, not Batman work stuff, Tim thought, remembering that Dr. Marcus worked for Wayne Enterprises. In other words, Tim could *actually* ask him about it.

“Dr. Marcus leads the Wayne Enterprises biomedical lab that got broken into on Friday night, right?”

Bruce’s body language shifted at once. He straightened his shoulders, becoming more alert.

Whoops, Tim thought. Maybe he should have been more subtle.

“How did you know... any of that?” Bruce asked, most of the rasp gone from his voice.

“I heard Alfred say his name,” Tim replied, his cheeks warm. “Then... internet.”

“Ah,” said Bruce, but he sounded amused now. His eyes were on Tim’s laptop again, which gave Tim an opportunity to notice other things about Bruce— like how there was also a faint smell of rubbing alcohol lingering around him, and that part of his right hand was in a splint.

Tim didn’t look away fast enough, and Bruce caught him staring. “Caught it in the car door earlier,” he explained— he lied.

“Ow,” Tim said blandly.

“Yeah,” Bruce agreed. “Well, anyway. You should get back to sleep. It’s almost morning.”

Tim nodded and slid down under the covers, feeling smaller, younger. But also safe. Bruce got to his feet and leaned slightly over him to clasp Tim’s forearm with his left hand.

Then he said, “Goodnight, Jas— *Tim.”*

Tim’s heart sank like a stone.

“Shit,” Bruce whispered. He raised his right hand to cover his face, then winced, swore again, and switched hands. *“Shit.* Tim, I’m—”

“It’s okay,” Tim cut him off, sitting up again. He wanted to reach out,

but he hesitated. “It’s late. You’re tired.”

“No, that’s not— there’s no excuse—”

“I understand,” Tim tried.

“—for forgetting,” Bruce finished.

“You didn’t, though,” said Tim. Everything in him was shaking now, but he kept going, because he had Bruce’s full attention, and that was... scary. “You didn’t forget. You just want him back.”

Bruce stared at him for a beat—long enough that Tim thought maybe he’d screwed up—before speaking again.

“I’m sorry, Tim,” he said. “I— I’m sorry.”

“It’s— I know,” Tim redirected at the last minute, because it wasn’t *okay*. Not really. “You should get some sleep, too.”

Bruce nodded slowly. His shoulders were slumped again. “Goodnight,” he said.

“’Night,” Tim echoed.

Bruce left the room without making a single floorboard creak. He pulled the door almost closed on his way out. Tim blinked in the darkness, then put his head back on the pillow.

He stared at the ceiling until the sun came up.

Down in the Batcave, Bruce paced.

To the car— no. He was too injured to go back out there.

To the stairs— no. Everyone up there needed to sleep.

To the heavy bag— no. His broken finger couldn’t take it.

To the phone— no. Gordon wouldn’t be at his desk for another hour at least.

To the stairs— no. He should work on AJ’s case.

To the computer— no. *He* needed to sleep.

To the cot in the medbay— no. He couldn’t sleep.

To the phone— no. Dick didn't want to talk to him.

To the stairs— no. He couldn't be Bruce Wayne right now.

To the equipment bench— maybe. There was a pile of batarangs that needed attention.

Yes. To the equipment bench.

No. His finger splint was too cumbersome.

To the computer.

A tap on the keyboard did nothing. Alfred must have turned it off.

To the cot in the medbay.

Three minutes. He still couldn't sleep.

To the computer.

Easy enough to hit the power switch. Didn't even need to use the broken finger.

The case distracted him for ten minutes. He needed AJ's evidence to progress.

To the equipment rack.

To the stairs with a cape and cowl in his uninjured hand— no. Too risky. No one knew what AJ knew except Bruce Wayne. How would he explain it?

To the equipment rack.

To the computer.

To Bruce Wayne's cell phone, abandoned on the desk.

He felt an odd sort of déjà vu, sitting down before the Batcomputer, picking the phone up, unlocking it.

No call from Lillian this time, though. That would probably come in a few days.

He swiped away notifications. There were dozens of them. He had barely looked at the thing since Nahum called him about the break-in

at the lab on Friday. One after another, he dismissed promotional emails, spam text messages, and social media updates he didn't care about. Then—

He sat up straighter. A message in the burner inbox he'd created for the sole purpose of subscribing to the batarazzi's blog. It had updated early Saturday morning.

He put the phone down and used the computer to open the blog instead. He was prepared to go through the usual process: examine the picture, pull any metadata from it he could, download it and add it to the folder with the rest, to build out the case file. He was prepared to investigate, to do anything that would take his mind off this terrible night.

He was not prepared for Robin—for *Jason*—to appear on the screen before him.

Jason. Alive, whole, well. Perched on the edge of the old Fraser building, a vivid spot of colour against the night sky. His mouth was turned down in that frown that Bruce couldn't help but associate with math homework. He smiled, even as the image blurred before him and something in his chest cracked open like a chasm to another world.

from my archives, the caption read.

Bruce put his head in his hands and wept.

Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Dick Grayson is in trouble.

He hadn't left his apartment all weekend— not since he'd tried to go out on patrol and realized he wasn't in the right headspace for it. He hadn't showered or shaved. He hadn't done any dishes or eaten anything that didn't come out of a box or bag. He hadn't talked to anyone or replied to any of the messages he'd received from his friends and teammates. He hadn't done anything since he idly checked a certain blog that he and Bruce had been keeping an eye on.

Dick knew he was in trouble.

He hadn't left his apartment all weekend— not since he'd tried to go out on patrol Thursday night and realized he wasn't in the right headspace for it. It wouldn't be safe— for himself or for those he encountered. Since then, he hadn't showered or shaved. He hadn't done any dishes or eaten anything that didn't come out of a box or bag. He hadn't talked to anyone or replied to any of the messages he'd received from his friends and teammates.

In other words, he was in trouble.

He'd been here before, and not that long ago, either. It'd been less than a year since he came back from an off-world mission and found out about Jason. He could still remember the anger that seared his insides when he heard the whole story, told to him by Bruce in bits and pieces like photographs with all the wrong items in focus. The Joker had a missile. Jason went to his parents' old place. Lady Shiva wasn't his mother. He left a note. Sheila betrayed him. Bruce let him go. Jason tried to save his mother's life. Batman was too late. The Joker had a missile.

Alfred hadn't been much better. He was obsessed with finding a book, but he wouldn't let Dick into Jason's room to help him look for it. It was untidy, he kept saying, and he didn't want to disturb it. Which made no sense until a month later when Dick saw that it had become a sort of shrine, immortalizing the moment Jason left, like time had stopped.

Dick had been there before, too. Time had slowed to a crawl the

moment his parents' rope snapped, the moment that all three of them realized at the same time what was about to happen. Their twin expressions of shock and horror would be forever burned into his memory, a twisted shrine all his own.

Time stopped again on Thursday afternoon, when he idly checked a certain blog that he and Bruce had been keeping an eye on, and found a week-old update.

from my archives.

The image and its simple caption set off a spark of the old anger—righteous rage against the injustice that ran rampant throughout the universe—but this time there was nothing to catch. No argument in the Cave half-in half-out of his suit, screaming at the black silhouette that was Bruce with his back turned to him. This time, Dick skipped straight to the part after the argument, where he barely bothered to keep himself alive and didn't leave the house for days on end.

He was going to have to, though, and soon. Tomorrow was his summer gymnastics class' final performance. It would be a whole day affair, with paperwork and his own practice in the morning (the coaching staff always did a routine, too, to show parents what could be possible if they convinced their kids and their bank accounts to keep it up). Then, after lunch, the kids—the chaos—would arrive.

There would be costume changes, make-up adjustments for the older kids (a light application for those who wanted it, a partial removal for those whose parents had made them look like the Joker before they left the house), and the nerves that always preceded a show. Dick would spend half his time saying things like, *No, you can't wear that necklace on the floor,* and *Okay, I think that's enough glitter,* and *Are you sure you don't have to go to the bathroom?* and the other half listening to things like, *Did you know my grandpa is coming today?* and *My sister said you're hot, what does that mean?* and *Coach Grayson, I think I'm gonna throw up.*

Dick loved it. He really did. The work was rewarding, the kids were great, and he was doing real good in the community. He loved watching the kids gain confidence and get better. He loved catching them when they inevitably fell and teaching them how to be as safe as possible while defying gravity. He loved the pre-show atmosphere, the about-to-perform jitters which felt so familiar he wasn't sure he could articulate it out loud. He even loved the noise, the overlapping chorus of *Help! my zipper is stuck,* and *Ow! my scrunchie's too tight,* and, of

course, *BUT I DON'T WANNA!*

Dick... didn't wanna. He was tired, even though he'd barely done anything. Which he knew meant that he *needed* to do things, to get over this hump and get back into his normal routine. To get back on track. To be himself again. To be good enough to go there tomorrow when his kids needed him. He needed to get up off the couch, reach out to one of his friends, go for a walk, or just do the damn dishes.

But... he didn't wanna.

He did, eventually. He dragged his feet the following morning— it definitely took until halfway through his own practice before he started to feel the *make it* part of *fake it 'til you make it,* but nobody else seemed to notice. Which either meant they were all too busy to pay him that much attention, or he was just way too good at seeming to be okay. (He knew which one of those he preferred to believe.)

By the time the performance wrapped up—with flowers, hugs, and sniffled promises to return next summer—Dick was more than ready to go back to his couch. But four nights without Nightwing was four nights too many, especially given how often he'd been moonlighting in Gotham lately. So he resisted the urge to become a couch potato after dinner and instead reviewed case files until dark. Then he suited up.

Right away, he could tell it was going to be a weird night. There was no shortage of crime, of course, but the city's energy was just... off.

For instance, Nightwing stopped a carjacking, and the man pointed his gun at him, then reconsidered and tossed it aside to try and take him on hand-to-hand. (He wasn't successful, for obvious reasons.)

Then there were the three ladies he caught trying to break into a cheque-cashing place. He watched them fiddle with the electronic door lock for almost twenty minutes before he realized they were trying to deactivate the alarm. That wasn't strange in and of itself, but it was the way they whispered to each other about *not letting* him *hear them.*

Finally, he interrupted, and the women's eyes searched behind him for a few seconds before they surrendered without a fight. It set Nightwing's teeth on edge, and not just because part of him was itching for a good brawl. (The carjacker barely counted.)

Then there was the mugger. He gave Nightwing a good chase, but when he was cornered...

“I’m sorry!” he exclaimed, holding out the purse he’d run off with. “Here, take it! Everything’s still in it, I swear!”

Nightwing approached, slow and careful. The mugger didn’t appear to have a weapon, but he seemed a little unstable, and Nightwing wasn’t taking any chances.

“Just don’t let ’em take me, man,” the mugger practically sobbed, holding out his wrists to be tied. “I promise I’ll never do it again!”

“Glad to hear it,” said Nightwing, but he wasn’t glad, he was suspicious. “You realize I can’t just let you go, though, right?”

The mugger shook his head. His eyes were darting every which way in his panic, a constant stream of muttering under his breath. Nightwing only caught a few words— something about *moving away from Gotham to be free of this shit.*

The pieces fell into place. Dick felt stupid for not seeing it sooner.

He sighed, leaving the mugger to wait for one of about three BPD officers that he trusted, then headed for an alley that ran between two high-rise apartment buildings. He grappled up to a balcony about four storeys up, then across to the eighth floor of the other building. He zig-zagged up the buildings in this way until he reached the roof. He heard excited murmurs from open windows behind him as he ascended, which was the point, of course— as ever, it was useful to draw their eyes to him instead of The Alternative. Nobody liked it when The Alternative came calling.

The roof seemed to be empty when he landed, but Nightwing knew better, just like he knew that the shadow he saw a moment ago wasn’t a particularly large owl.

“How long have you been following me?” he asked the air.

“Since the carjacking,” Batman answered, materializing from between two air conditioning units.

“All night, then,” said Nightwing, trying hard to keep the annoyance out of his voice.

Batman inclined his head, not disputing it.

NIghtwing clenched his jaw. “Now for the million-dollar question: why?”

“I’m chasing a lead on a case,” Batman replied swiftly. “In the last few months, four potential homicide victims have been cremated at Shady Pines Mortuary here in Blüdhaven.”

“So you decided that the Big Bad Batman should cross the river and make my entire city’s criminal underworld shit their pants?”

Batman—Bruce—didn’t have a response for that.

“You could have just called me,” Dick snapped. “Did you think I wouldn’t have looked into it for you? Or do you just not trust me to do it right?”

“No, that—”

But Dick wasn’t done yet. The anger that had been glowing faintly in his chest since Thursday finally found a batch of kindling and took a big breath of oxygen.

“I’m building a reputation here— a *life* here, away from you,” he went on. “How am I supposed to get any momentum when you just show up whenever you feel like checking my work?”

“I wasn’t checking—”

“You tell me I’m a hero in my own right, you tell me it’s my time to move on,” he practically shouted, getting in Bruce’s face. “You give away my *name—”*

Bruce actually, visibly flinched at that. *Good,* Dick thought savagely.

“—but you still think you own enough of me that you don’t have to give me a heads-up when you’re coming here? When you know—you *have to* know!—what your being here does to this place.”

“I— yes,” Bruce admitted.

“Would you do this to any of your other allies?” Dick demanded. “Just pop into Central City one night with absolutely no warning, and see how the Flash feels about that?”

“No,” Bruce said, so quietly that Dick almost missed it.

“I didn’t think so,” Dick retorted.

Then he walked away— though he didn't go far, just a half-dozen steps before he pivoted and took another half-dozen in the opposite direction. Bruce stayed silent while Dick paced, either because he wasn't sure what to say, or because he thought maybe Dick would start up again.

But Dick was pretty sure he was done. He blew out the rest of the air in his lungs and turned back to face Bruce.

"You could've just called," he said again, deflated. "Or dropped by my place. You know, like a normal person? In the daytime?"

"Your summer class had their final performance today," Bruce said quietly, which surprised the hell out of Dick. "I thought maybe you'd be too tired to go out. But when I got to your place, you were already gone."

"Which brings us back to the lack of a call, B," Dick said pointedly.

Bruce just nodded, his shoulders hunched. The posture was so unlike him that Dick took a good look at him for the first time and noticed a few things.

One, his white-out lenses were retracted, showing his real blue eyes, which wouldn't meet Dick's. Two, there was a darker-than-normal five o'clock shadow on his chin. Three, two of the fingers on his right glove were stiffer than the rest. Most people probably wouldn't have noticed that, but Bruce—well, Batman—had a habit of opening and closing his hands when he was uneasy, and right now his left was doing it, while his right wasn't.

"Are you okay?" Dick asked him bluntly.

Bruce raised his head. Four, Dick thought: his eyes were bloodshot.

"You're not okay," he answered his own question.

"No," Bruce said, voice just above a whisper.

Dick blinked, needing a second to process that straight answer. "The case?" he prompted.

"In part."

Dick considered this, then considered how he might ask his next question without breaking the rule about not using real names in the

field.

“Does the other part have anything to do with a... certain recent addition to your household?”

Bruce closed his tired eyes for a second or two. “Only indirectly.”

Dick waited a beat, wondering if he would go on, unsurprised when he didn’t. He suppressed another sigh, frustrated. Why did it always have to be this way? Why couldn’t Bruce have just *said* something about what was really going on in his life? Why did he have to come here and push Dick’s buttons like this when he could have just been upfront from the beginning?

Dick knew the answer: Bruce was Bruce. He was getting better, but he was still Bruce.

“Look, why don’t we go somewhere that’s not here,” Dick suggested, “and have a real conversation about this?”

Bruce looked out at the skyline. “Tomorrow?” he proposed, but he hesitated before adding on the rest. “Will you come home?”

The question was a quick blur of syllables. Dick had a feeling that this was the real question that he’d come here to ask, and he appreciated that it finally came out—Bruce was *trying*—though he still resented the fact that it took them so long to get here.

“Yeah,” he answered. “I’ll come home.”

Bruce nodded, his shoulders relaxing barely enough to notice in the suit, but Dick had been reading Batman’s moods for years. He could recognize gratitude when he saw it.

“I’ll... get out of your city now,” Bruce said, which Dick took as the apology it was.

Dick nodded and stepped back to let him get to the edge of the roof. “See you tomorrow.”

Bruce nodded back, meeting his eye for just a moment before he slid the cowl’s lenses into place. Then, with a swish of his cape, he was gone, off into the night.

Dick waited until the morning rush hour was over—and then maybe he put it off a little longer—before he set out for Gotham the next day.

He arrived just before noon to find the side door already unlocked. He followed the scent of rosemary and sage to the kitchen, where Alfred was tossing a spinach salad with walnuts, chopped pears, and chunks of blue cheese.

“Hey, Alfred,” Dick greeted him. Alfred turned with a smile.

“Right on time,” he said. He set down the salad tongs and gave Dick a hug. “How are you, my boy?”

“I’m alright. Bruce told you I was coming?” he said as they let go of each other.

“He did,” Alfred answered. “Though he failed to explain why.”

“Figures,” Dick muttered. No way Bruce would be willing tell anyone about how vulnerable he’d let himself be last night.

Dick glanced around the kitchen, but it was empty. “Where’s Tim?”

“Out with a friend,” Alfred said, in a tone of voice that meant *girlfriend.*

“Oh,” said Dick, surprised. “How long has that been going on?”

“About three weeks,” Alfred replied, also understanding at once. “They’ve been spending a lot of time together lately. He’s hardly been here the past week.”

“Oh,” Dick said again, in a very different tone, because Alfred’s lips were pursed. He was unhappy, but Tim wasn’t the source.

“Yes,” Alfred agreed shortly, turning away again.

Dick watched him drizzle homemade dressing over the salad. It was faintly pink, probably made with raspberry vinegar. Alfred gave the salad another light toss. The spinach leaves shimmered in the sunlight coming in through the terrace doors.

“He’ll be back for dinner,” Alfred said, like there had been no interruption. “Are you ready for lunch?”

“Yeah,” said Dick. He didn’t move. “Bruce?”

“Downstairs.”

“Of course.”

Alfred gestured to the salad bowl. Dick understood and picked it up, while Alfred pulled a dish of roasted chicken breasts out of the oven. Dick carried the salad to the table, noticing how it was already set for two. Dick poured them both a glass of water. Alfred placed a piece of chicken on each of their plates.

“Alfred, tell me what’s going on,” Dick said, staring at the third piece, still in the pan.

Alfred exhaled and took his seat. Dick did the same, a second too late. “I’ll tell you what I know,” Alfred began. “But it’s far from everything.”

Dick didn’t quite believe that. Alfred knew all— he always had. But Dick nodded, served himself some salad, and waited for Alfred to explain.

Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Dick and Bruce work the case.

It was Classic Bruce, really— using the work to distract himself from his personal troubles.

Chapter Notes

Hello, I'm back with what was originally the second half of chapter 27. Since Friday was the one-year anniversary of this story, I decided to split it up and share part of the next update early. From here on out, chapters will be posted every other Tuesday.

While they ate, Alfred explained, and, long story short: everything was a mess.

Bruce had also seen the batarazzi blog post, and it had thrown him for an emotional loop, too. Alfred told Dick all about the rough night that had resulted in Bruce getting two broken fingers and a handful of stitches, and how lucky he was that that was all he got. Alfred also told Dick that he'd finally sent Bruce to bed around 5:30, then returned to the Cave at 10 to find that he hadn't slept. The batarazzi blog was still up on the Batcomputer screen.

Since then, Bruce had barely left the Cave. It was Classic Bruce, really — throwing himself into the work, even though he wasn't at his best, and his injuries proved it.

Even Alfred was shaken by the post, but it turned out that that wasn't the only blast from the past to hurt his heart. Just a day before the photo was posted online, he'd found Tim reading Jason's book— the one that he'd been so desperate to find right after he died.

As troubling as it was to hear, Dick found Alfred's updates oddly comforting. His words proved the exact opposite of what Dick's brain had been telling him during his depressive funk over the weekend: he *wasn't* alone in his grief after all, because everyone except him *hadn't* moved on from Jason's death.

Dick wished that Tim was here, too, so he could talk to him about it.

The poor kid had stumbled into something bigger than he could even imagine.

But Tim wasn't here, and Dick didn't think it was a coincidence that he'd been making himself scarce over the last week— Dick barely wanted to be around *himself* when he was messed up, let alone Bruce and Alfred, too. That didn't make it right, though; the point of Tim having a foster home was to *have a home,* not just a roof over his head at night.

And what bothered Dick even more was how unbothered Bruce seemed about the fact that this kid—who it seemed he was starting to really bond with up until a week ago—had all-but disappeared.

"It's the second last week of summer vacation," Bruce told Dick with a shrug.

Dick frowned, crossing his arms over his chest. Alfred had sent him down to the Cave with a plate once it was clear that Bruce wasn't coming up. The food now lay untouched while Bruce fiddled with one of his gauntlet communicators at the workbench.

"If Tim wants to hang out with his... with Pat and his friends all day while he can, then I don't have a problem with that," Bruce went on. "He *is* fifteen, you know."

What the fuck? Dick thought, but he didn't say that. Instead, he said, "When *I* was fifteen, you—"

"Let you stay out all night and punch bank robbers," Bruce finished swiftly, focused on the communicator he was soldering. "Nice try."

"When *I* was fifteen, you insisted on meeting, researching, and practically interrogating all of my friends," Dick said, ignoring the interruption. "Have you even met Pat?"

"No," Bruce admitted, "but Alfred has. A few times now. And I've spoken with their mother. They're a good kid. Tim's safe with them and their family."

Dick's heart sank as he heard what Bruce wasn't saying: Tim wasn't just safe, he was *safer* with Pat and their family, because Bruce didn't trust himself enough to be a parent right now.

"It wasn't just the picture of Jason, was it?" Dick concluded. "Something else upset you. Something to do with Tim."

Bruce's soldering iron slipped. A thin plume of smoke rose from the gauntlet, and Dick caught a whiff of scorched leather before he jerked his hand up again.

After a full minute of silence, Dick accepted that that was about as clear a confession as he was likely to get. He blew out a breath and wandered away from the workbench, heading towards the computer. The case would be easier to talk about, if nothing else.

Then he spotted something very out of place on Bruce's computer desk. It was a piece of lined paper, folded to look like a heart. Dick recognized it at once; it was one of the many ways that kids folded notes— and it wasn't for amateurs. No, a heart ranked among the most difficult. But it was worth it for a love note, of course.

He smiled faintly, struck with the memory of receiving one from a blonde girl, Jessica R.—her last name was lost to him forever now—at recess, just a few days after he started school in Gotham. He'd had no idea how to open it, but the girl didn't know that. Three days later, she'd yelled at him during lunch, calling him all kinds of names that he didn't understand because he hadn't really learned how to swear in English yet. Eventually he got the gist and explained that he didn't know she'd given him a letter—he'd thought it was just a pretty piece of paper—and everyone laughed until the next scandal arose and took the heat off him.

After that, he taught himself how to fold and unfold every shape of note he saw the other kids passing, and he used the sleight of hand he'd learned from one of Haly's magicians to make notes disappear and reappear until everyone forgot about that time he accidentally broke Jessica R.'s heart.

He picked the note up, expecting the paper to be soft and frayed. He expected it to be one of his, something Bruce had found in a box of his old things. But this paper was new and crisp, with only a few dark smudges on the outside when he turned it over to examine it in detail. Where had it come from? What was it doing here in the Batcave, of all places?

"I found that on patrol the other night," Bruce answered the unasked question, joining Dick near the computer. "On a rooftop near AJ's house. Meant to throw it out."

"Huh," said Dick. He twirled the heart between his fingers. "Mind if I keep it instead?"

Bruce shrugged one shoulder. Dick tucked the note into the pocket of his jeans while Bruce picked up a tall stack of manila folders. For one frightening second, Dick thought he was going to give them all to him, but he just shuffled the pile aside until he could see a tablet behind them. He turned it on and placed it in Dick's newly empty hands. Dick used his biometrics to unlock it while Bruce started to explain.

"That's everything about the case, about the four victims whose bodies passed through Shady Pines," he said. "At first, I thought it was only the second one—"

"Tiffany Close?" said Dick, scrolling down. Like Bruce, he preferred to think of victims as people first and foremost.

"Yes," said Bruce.

Dick read through the victim profile and Bruce's summarized report, his eyebrows climbing higher the further he went. "She lived in Metropolis, died in Gotham, and a forensic pathologist in *Blüdhaven* performed the autopsy?"

"So you share my concern," Bruce said dryly.

"Yeah," Dick sighed. It was no secret that Blüdhaven's corrupt bureaucracy could make almost anything disappear, but this was the most blatant example he'd seen in a while.

He kept reading. Bruce's succinct statement of facts and observations seemed neutral, but Dick could read the anger and frustration behind every word. It seemed that former LexCorp employee Tiffany Close had been found in an alley in Gotham City in the early morning by a trash collector. The GCPD investigation revealed that she'd been shot with a 9mm pistol—in other words, the most common handgun in the world—and that there were no witnesses to the murder. About a month later, they labelled it a cold case and, three days after that, her body, still in Blüdhaven, was cremated at Shady Pines— apparently by accident. Somehow, the 34-year-old had been mistaken for an 87-year-old Jane Doe who'd died of natural causes some months prior.

The whole thing smelled. *Bad.*

"But Close's case is just where the corruption is most obvious," said Bruce, somehow sensing when Dick had finished the paragraph. "It took a lot of digging, but I finally got my hands on the original autopsy reports. The doctors' names are different each time, but the handwriting matches. Only one of these doctors actually exists, and, of

his recent autopsies, many were sent to Shady Pines for burial or cremation."

"But you haven't actually contacted this doctor yet?" Dick guessed.

Bruce shook his head. "I haven't been to Shady Pines yet, either."

"Well, maybe I'll drop in on both of them the next time I'm in the neighbourhood," said Dick, faux-friendly.

"I was hoping you'd say that," said Bruce, with a hint of a smile.

He continued tidying up the desk, straightening and putting away files, while Dick took a seat and skimmed the summarized report on each of the other victims: Blake Hiss, 27-year-old lab assistant, dead from an apparent drowning in Gotham Bay; Anthony Siemens, 58-year-old lab supervisor, dead from apparent carbon monoxide poisoning in his yacht in Gotham marina; and Michaela Rota, 42-year-old head of biomedical research, who seemed to have gone off the side of Kane Bridge in her car in the middle of the night. All of the victims had worked under Dr. Rota in Metropolis, and all of them except Rota had left LexCorp by the time of their death.

Then there was the fifth victim profile, labelled as *possible intended target.*

"A Wayne Enterprises employee?" Dick said in surprise.

"Yes," Bruce answered darkly. His left hand closed into a fist and re-opened. Closed and re-opened, though he didn't say more.

"What's the connection?" Dick asked finally.

Bruce shook his head. "I'm still working on that. He and Rota were old friends, so it's likely that she's the link. But that still doesn't explain why someone is targeting those close to her."

"Or Rota herself," Dick added. "If the killer wanted something from Rota, it makes sense that they'd go after the people around her— her employees, her friends. But why kill her directly? What could they gain once she's dead?"

"My thoughts exactly," said Bruce. "My working theory, as it stands, is that LexCorp has hired the Falcone syndicate to take out their dirty laundry. Rota and those working for her knew something they shouldn't have known. It's likely that AJ knows it too, though he may

not know what it is yet."

"The lab and his house were broken into," Dick said, reading on. "They were looking for something?"

"I think so," Bruce agreed.

"So we have to figure out what that is," Dick concluded. Bruce nodded grimly. "Where's Dr. Marcus now?"

"Protective custody," Bruce replied, and Dick was about to question how safe he'd be with the GCPD when Bruce added, "I've got the League on it."

Dick relaxed. It made sense—Bruce's prime suspect was Lex Luthor's organization, after all—but it also reminded him of something.

"So this is the case you were working on that night we— uh." His words faltered. "This is what Lavaste was involved with," he tried again a second later. "When I gave you that tip about him being in Metropolis."

"Yes," said Bruce, pretending not to notice Dick's awkward redirect. "I don't suppose there's any chance you'll tell me who your source is now?"

Dick paused, hesitant to kick off another fight when they'd just started getting along. But he'd made a promise to Tim, and he really didn't want to get the kid in trouble, even if there was a chance it could help the case.

Bruce surprised him before he'd reached a decision. "Never mind," he said. "I understand you want to keep your word."

Dick smiled faintly. "If it helps," he said, "I doubt it's relevant. My source isn't likely to know anything else about the case."

Bruce nodded simply. "Okay."

Dick breathed out a small sigh, relieved and grateful to be trusted in this. He went back to reading the report, but looked up again just a few seconds later.

"Wait, Bug's back?"

"So it would seem," said Bruce, leaning against the desk. "They sent pictures to the GCPD, which tipped them off to the break-in at AJ's

and raised the alarm about him being missing."

"Where are the pictures?" Dick asked. He paged through the digital case file, expecting to find scanned copies.

"Gordon still has them," said Bruce. He pushed off the desk and began busying himself with another stack of folders, avoiding his eye.

Okay, Dick thought, watching him. Something had happened with Gordon, too. That was even more surprising than something happening with Tim. James Gordon and Batman had been partners since before Dick came along; it took a lot for them to fall out, though he had to admit it wouldn't be the first time.

"Digital or physical?" Dick asked, deciding to leave the personal stuff aside for the moment.

"Physical," said Bruce. "Unfortunately. I hope I didn't waste Barbara's time."

"It's fine," Dick reassured him. It was, in fact, better than fine. Babs had been downright *thrilled* by the challenge of setting a trap for Bug on her father's computer without leaving any evidence that Jim or the GCPD's IT department could trace back to her. "You never know when they'll try that again."

Bruce acknowledged this with a nod. Dick reached the end of the report summary and set the tablet aside.

"So, how do you want to tackle this?" he asked. "What's our priority?"

Bruce seemed almost excited by the question. After how run-down he'd looked in Blüdhaven last night, it was a relief to see him animated, even if Dick knew it was just more Classic Bruce— using the work to distract himself from his personal troubles.

"The way I see it, we have four main leads," Bruce began, and he ticked them off on the non-broken fingers of his left hand. "The mortuary, the doctor, Rota herself, and the Falcones."

"We have five leads," Dick corrected him. "You forgot Bug."

Bruce blinked. "What about Bug?"

"Well, they might know something," Dick pointed out.

"It's possible," Bruce admitted. "But based on past interactions, I think

it's safe to assume that Bug is a neutral party, especially when it comes to this case. Our other leads are more solid. They should take priority."

"I disagree," Dick countered firmly. "I think we should look into Bug."

"And I think we should leave Bug by the wayside," said Bruce, just as firm.

They stared each other down for a moment, then Dick exhaled through his nose.

"Okay. We'll leave Bug by the wayside," he said, with absolutely no intention of doing so.

Bruce gave him a familiar look—the one that meant he could see right through him—but he let it go. "Given the Blüdhaven connection, it makes sense for you to handle the mortuary and doctor."

"Sure," Dick agreed easily. "What about you?"

"I'm going to dig deeper into the victims, see if I can get a bead on what ties them together." He paused. "Except for AJ, of course. He's known me for years, so it's probably safer if the League talks to him instead."

"Or I could do it," Dick suggested. "I've never met the guy."

"True," Bruce said slowly, but Dick could tell he didn't think it was the best idea.

"Okay," Dick said, letting it lie. "What else?"

Bruce's expression darkened. "I want to shake down the Falcones some more, see what I can find out."

"Need any help with that?" Dick offered. He *still* hadn't gotten that good old-fashioned brawl he was itching for last night, and Gotham was a better place than most to find a fight.

"Maybe," said Bruce, which was another surprise. Dick had been expecting him to refuse that, too. "If you're sticking around anyway."

It was a question without a question mark. "For a day or two," Dick answered, then he smiled. "I probably owe Tim some one-on-one time."

Bruce's calm detective demeanour cracked. For a moment, he seemed smaller, shakier, more human.

"That... that's good," he managed to say.

"Yeah," Dick agreed shortly. "Speaking of, it's almost 5. Alfred said Tim would be home for dinner, so—"

"So we should get upstairs," Bruce finished.

Dick nodded and pushed himself out of the chair. He picked up the tablet and followed Bruce to the entrance. While Bruce started up the stairs, Dick turned around for a look at the Cave.

He'd swear it used to be bigger.

Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Meanwhile, in Tim's world...

It was okay, though, Tim told himself. Really, it was. Tim knew why Bruce couldn't stand the sight of him, and it wasn't his fault. The least Tim could do was to make himself scarce while Bruce figured out that he wasn't ready to have another kid.

The call from Alfred was expected. He usually phoned in the afternoon, asking if Tim would be back for dinner. Usually, that answer was yes, though he'd said no a few times and nothing bad had happened yet. Either Alfred didn't know he was lying, or he knew and didn't care. Tim wasn't sure which of those options he preferred, and he didn't really feel like thinking about it too hard.

Today, however, the call was different. Alfred wasn't *asking* if Tim was coming back to the manor; Alfred was *telling* him to come back, because—

"Dick's there?" Tim repeated.

"Indeed," said Alfred. "Please return no later than five."

Tim checked his watch and winced. It was already past 3:30, and the bus would take almost two hours at this time of day.

Luckily, Alfred added, "Do you need a ride?"

"Uh," said Tim, looking at his gear scattered around the rooftop.

"I'll send a taxi," Alfred answered his own question. "Text me Pat's address, please."

Again— no sign of surprise, or expectation for a longer explanation. (Tim had one ready, of course; he was going to tell the truth, about how Pat's mom didn't usually get home from work until 4:30.)

"Sure, just, uh, give me a minute?" said Tim, scrambling to start packing up.

"Take your time," Alfred told him. "You don't have to leave right away. Just so long as you're here by—"

“Five, got it,” Tim said quickly. “Okay, thanks. I’ll see you soon.”

“Goodbye, Master Tim,” Alfred replied politely, and he disconnected.

Tim breathed out a long breath and slid his phone back into the front pocket of his jeans. Fortunately, the drive from Pat’s neighbourhood to Wayne Manor wasn’t far. Unfortunately, he wasn’t anywhere near Pat’s neighbourhood right now.

Well, he supposed he’d better get on a bus.

He packed up his things. He’d brought his digital camera, a few different lenses, and a notepad and pen, plus some snacks and a water bottle. He’d been up here most of the day, not that he had anything to show for it. The stakeout had been a total bust.

He was careful as he headed down the rusty fire escape, and even more careful when he got to the street. He had thousands of dollars’ worth of camera equipment in his beat-up red backpack, and there’d been a rash of daytime muggings lately. He’d come downtown today to see if he could photograph one of the thieves in action, not to become one of their victims. The GCPD weren’t sure whether the crimes were connected or just coincidence, and Tim had been hoping to gather some evidence to help them out, since Batman was almost always MIA during the day and had been *very* MIA since the night AJ came to the manor.

The atmosphere the morning after that night had been so awkward and tense that Alfred had actually turned on the tiny kitchen TV while he, AJ, and Tim were having breakfast. Tim watched with some alarm as the news channel’s talking heads recounted the Bat’s busy night. One of the anchors called it a ‘rampage’ and noted that several injuries had been reported. From there, the program segued into a panel discussion about whether or not Batman was a force for good in Gotham— a familiar topic, but usually more than one of the four guests spoke out in favour of Batman’s brand of justice.

Then Bruce had appeared in the kitchen doorway, bleary-eyed with messy hair and a scowl that Tim recognized, even though he’d never seen it on Bruce’s unmasked face before. Bruce walked across the kitchen and turned the TV off—*subtle,* Tim thought—and by the time he turned around, he was smiling his *Bruce-Wayne-addressing-the-public* smile again.

He announced that the police would be coming at 11 to take AJ’s statement, and the tension that had been somewhat weakened by the

TV came back in force. AJ's face was ashy, and he looked scared. Tim was desperately curious as to why the police would be coming—he still hadn't gotten a real explanation as to why AJ was there in the first place—but Alfred practically whisked him out of the room and kept him busy upstairs sorting laundry long enough that the conversation between AJ and Bruce ended before Tim could hope to eavesdrop.

Then Pat had texted, inviting him over for an all-day video game tournament. Tim, figuring he had nothing else to do, set off in search of Bruce to ask for permission. He accidentally surprised Alfred in Bruce's study instead, who quickly assured him it would be fine to go and asked if he needed a ride.

"No, Pat's brother can pick me up," Tim answered.

He couldn't help but notice that Alfred didn't seem to be *doing* anything in the study. He wasn't dusting, or collecting dirty cups, or vacuuming. He was just standing between the desk and the clock, promising Tim that he didn't need to clear it with Bruce before he left, and asking that Tim just let him know whether or not he'd be back in time for dinner.

Tim replied that he would, and he took off. (He had gotten very good at recognizing when adults wanted him elsewhere.)

And that... was pretty much how the rest of the week had gone. Tim barely even had to lie. All he had to say was he wanted to do something with his friends, and Bruce practically held the door open for him. He asked a few questions when Tim was at the dinner table, but he hadn't looked Tim in the eye since the night that AJ came, and they didn't spend any real time together one-on-one.

Even on Thursday, the night that Bruce usually took him out for dinner between swim class and Spanish, it had been Alfred in the parking lot. And as funny as it was to watch Alfred's mouth twist in distaste when Tim told him he wanted fries with gravy for dinner, the centre of his chest still ached a little at the thought that Bruce wasn't there with a new cold case for them to discuss.

It was okay, though, Tim told himself again when he got to the bus stop. Really, it was. Tim knew why Bruce couldn't stand the sight of him, and it wasn't his fault. The least Tim could do was to make himself scarce while Bruce figured out that he wasn't ready to have another kid.

Because Tim had finally realized—and accepted—that *that* was what this whole staying-with-Bruce-Wayne thing was really about. Tim wasn't living at Wayne Manor because Batman was onto him, or saw him as a threat. Tim was living at Wayne Manor because Bruce had decided to give parenthood another shot, and now that he'd figured out that it wasn't for him, it would all be over soon. Either Bruce would keep him and give him a long leash like his parents did, or he'd send Tim back into the system. Either way, it was okay.

Or, it was going to be. Tim had spent most of his time in between crime scene shoots this week visiting family law offices that advertised free consultations, and he was pretty sure that he'd found a good one yesterday. Mr. Rockwell—Tim wasn't going to call him Devon, no matter many times he insisted—had heard Tim out at least, which was more than Tim could say about some of the others. He also seemed to think that Tim had a good case for emancipation. The fee would be challenging, but Mr. Rockwell said that if his parents lost their custody appeal—which had been deferred for-fricking-ever because they were almost never in the country—*they* would have to foot the bill instead of Tim.

(Tim had spent a second or two feeling guilty about that every few hours ever since he left the lawyer's office, but it would go away in time. Probably.)

He boarded the crowded bus and took his backpack off, holding it close to his chest as he made his way as far back as he could. He only had to ride this bus for six stops, then he was transferring to another route that would take him close enough that he could find an address for the cab in Pat's neighbourhood. It didn't have to be Pat's address exactly; Alfred had only been there once, and he'd asked Tim to send him the address, so he clearly didn't remember.

...unless he did, and this was some kind of elaborate trap to catch Tim in a lie?

Tim took a breath and told himself that he was just being paranoid, that there was nothing more going on.

But why was Dick here? Was he helping Bruce with a case, or was this a personal visit? Was he here for Tim? Did he know, somehow, what Tim had been up to all week— the photography, *or* the appointments at the lawyers' offices? He hoped that, if Dick knew anything, it was about the former and not the latter. Taking pictures of criminal activity in Gotham was likely an annoyance to Batman and Nightwing,

but at least it wasn't a betrayal of the home that Bruce, Dick, and Alfred had (sort of) started to give him.

That was another reason Tim liked Mr. Rockwell. He'd promised that anything Tim told him would stay confidential. He'd specifically promised that he wouldn't tell Tim's parents or his 'foster dad.' He didn't even insist that Tim tell him who that was— which was good, because Tim hadn't thought to come up with a fake name for Bruce. So he'd nodded and taken Mr. Rockwell's card and promised to call once he decided to move forward with the emancipation, or if he had any more questions.

Tim was thrown out of his thoughts when he realized that the sound he was hearing was the announcement for his stop. He lunged to pull the cord, just barely grabbing it in time. Several passengers shot him disgruntled looks as he squeezed his way out the door, but none of them were looking particularly murderous—or inappropriately happy, which was *way* worse—so Tim figured he was fine. Once on the sidewalk, he put his backpack on and crossed the street to get to the next stop.

This bus wasn't coming for ten minutes. He sank onto the bench, which was covered with so many layers of graffiti Tim couldn't be sure of its original colour, and continued thinking.

He'd say that the all-day video game tournament was today, he decided. The memory of that (actually very fun) day was still fresh in his head; he could generate convincing anecdotes if asked. But would he be asked? He'd gone most of the week without having to answer many questions; Bruce had barely said two words to him, and Alfred had been warm but distant. Dick, though...

Dick would probably ask. Dick would probably even care about what Tim had been up to today— or at least he'd be more convincing when it came to pretending that he cared. Tim wondered again why he was here, and how long he was planning to stay. Would Tim be able to go out again tomorrow? Or would Dick want to spend time with him? What would they do if he did?

The bus came early, and it was much less full than the last one. Tim actually got a seat this time, and he stared out the window as the bus rolled into nicer and nicer neighbourhoods. Gotham Academy was just a few blocks away; Pat actually walked in nice weather. Tim wondered how he was going to get there in—yikes—just over a week. For years, he'd walked far enough from his parents' place to take

public transit to school, mainly because he didn't have an alternative, but he had a feeling that Bruce wouldn't be on board with that plan. Alfred would likely drive him. Tim wondered if he could convince Alfred to drop him off at Pat's house, then they could walk together. That would be nice.

He got off the bus three blocks from Pat's street and made his way to a skate park that Bruce and Alfred thought he'd been to several times already. Once there, he scanned the area and made sure Pat wasn't actually there before pulling out his phone again. It was almost four-thirty, which was perfect— not too early that he seemed eager to leave, but well within Alfred's stated rules.

We walked to the park to get some air, he typed to Alfred. *Can the cab just pick me up here?*

Glad you spent some time away from the screen, Alfred replied, and Tim snorted. *That will be fine.*

Great, said Tim, and he sent the park's address.

Three minutes away, Alfred sent a moment later. *Please confirm arrival.*

You bet, said Tim, and he added a smiley face that he honestly felt was warranted.

All in all, he thought, as he watched the street for the cab, things could be worse.

He entered the manor via the side door as usual and found the kitchen full of delicious smells and Alfred busy at the stove.

"Hey, Alfred," Tim greeted him. "Do you need help?"

"Welcome home, Master Tim," said Alfred, sending him a very quick smile as he stirred two pots at once. "And thank you, but I will be fine."

Tim was expecting that. He huffed a laugh. "Let me just drop my bag off upstairs, and I'll come back to help."

Alfred didn't protest again. He had five—no, six—pots bubbling in front of him, and no one else was around.

Tim took the stairs two at a time, not thinking about anything besides getting to his room as quickly as possible, and not looking where he

was going. So of course he nearly collided with Bruce at the top landing as he was coming from the other hall, the one that led to his study.

“Whoa,” Bruce almost laughed, catching him by the shoulders just a second before they crashed together. It figured that Batman would have such stellar reflexes. Still, the touch startled Tim, and he jumped. Bruce let him go at once.

“Sorry,” Tim said awkwardly. “I should watch where I’m going.”

“It’s okay,” Bruce said. He smiled again, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Did you just get home?”

“Mhm,” said Tim. Then, because he didn’t want to have to tell a fake account of his day twice—and risk getting some details wrong—he changed the subject. “Where’s Dick?”

“He’s downstairs,” Bruce replied.

Tim frowned. “Oh. I didn’t see him.”

Bruce blinked, and his expression shifted into something almost alarmed.

“I’m sure he’s there,” Tim added quickly, trying to reassure him. “I’m sure he didn’t, like, take off or something. I was just... surprised he didn’t come say hi when he heard me come in.”

(Surprised and a little hurt, actually, but Tim wasn’t going to say that part out loud.)

Before Bruce could respond, a bit of movement over his shoulder caught Tim’s eye. It was Dick, emerging from Bruce’s study with something in his hand, closing the door behind him. He glanced up, and his eyes landed on Tim at once. He grinned.

“Timmy,” he called, hurrying over. “You’re home.”

“Hey, Dick,” said Tim, grinning back at him. Bruce moved aside, making room for Dick to give Tim a big, tight hug.

“Bruce said you were downstairs,” Tim said as they pulled back.

Dick shot Bruce a look, too fast for Tim to interpret. “I was,” he said. “I snuck back up when he wasn’t looking. Realized I left this in your office,” he added to Bruce, holding up the thing in his hand. It was a

sleek black tablet.

To Tim's surprise, Bruce's eyes narrowed. "You brought that with you?"

"Yeah," said Dick.

Bruce's mouth twisted into a scowl. "And you're sure that was a good idea?"

Dick shrugged, not seeming bothered at all by the *DANGER AHEAD* signals that Bruce was broadcasting loud and clear. "Thought I might want to read it later."

"Yes. Later," Bruce repeated. His lips barely moved.

Tim looked between them, his eyes bouncing like a tennis ball from player to player. They were speaking in code— this wasn't Bruce and Dick, he realized. This was Batman and Nightwing communicating with each other in front of an oblivious civilian.

Tim smiled, playing his part to perfection. "I'm gonna drop this in my room," he said, hefting his bag. "I'll see you guys downstairs."

He turned down the bedroom hall without a second look, but stopped the moment he knew he was out of their line of sight. He crossed his fingers, and, for once, he got lucky.

"You shouldn't have brought that," Bruce said in an undertone. "Go put it back."

"Can't now, he knows I have it," Dick replied. Bruce must have made a face, because he quickly added, "Relax, B, it's fine. The more you make a fuss, the more attention you draw to something you don't want people to notice. *You* taught me that, for crying out loud."

There was another beat of silence—possibly a glare and counter-glare —before the floor creaked. Tim listened to their footsteps descend the stairs, then let out the breath he was holding. He made his way to his bedroom in a daze and dropped his backpack on his bed. Then he stood in the middle of the floor for a moment, his heart racing.

That was the closest he'd been to Batman in almost three months, he realized, despite sleeping under the man's roof. Since he'd been here at Wayne Manor, Tim hadn't actually crossed paths with *Batman* at all. Bruce was Bruce only, and it wasn't like Tim had been able to go out

at night and follow him. (He'd been working on the security system, though, and he thought he was close.)

He hadn't realized how much he'd missed this— his whole body felt alive, humming like a low buzz of electricity was radiating out from the centre of his chest. It was the feeling of standing on the edge of a rooftop, watching through his camera as Batman pounced. It was hurrying to the next building when Nightwing swung by, because Tim knew there was something worth seeing over there. It was the Bat-Signal high in the sky. It was a shadow moving behind the cathedral's gargoyles. It was a shout in the night for help, and it was the knowledge that help was coming.

And it was what Tim needed to do.

He knew that with an unwavering certainty, clearer than possibly anything had ever been in his life. He had to be *out there.* He wasn't meant for this indoor life as Bruce Wayne's sort-of son. He'd do what he had to do— he'd do anything to get back out there, no matter what it cost him. If he got caught and Bruce kicked him out, who cared? Tim would just call Mr. Rockwell and start the emancipation process tomorrow. And if he didn't get caught? Then he could follow Batman just like he used to. Win-win. He'd be able to get back to doing work that mattered, and he'd get to have this feeling back again.

Tonight, he decided, his eyes landing on the red blinking light beside his locked window. Tonight, he'd test his code on the security system. Tonight, he'd follow Batman.

Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

> Batman's investigation gets interrupted, and Bruce fears it's all happening again.
>
> *Alfred paused. “Master Tim has run away, sir.”*
>
> *Alfred kept talking, but Bruce couldn’t hear him. The chill he’d felt a moment ago had turned his entire body into solid ice.*

Chapter Notes

> Another "mind the tags" chapter. This one has to do with flashbacks and panic attacks. Take good care, friends.

The line waiting to get into the Loose Seal Saloon was long, stretching almost to the boardwalk, even though it was already half-past one, and the bar would clearly be packed until last call at two. The music thumped, audible even half a block away and three storeys up from the street. From his perch, Batman could see that the patio out back was so crowded with loud, drunken patrons that there was barely space for the staff to move around them.

He could only assume the bar was so busy tonight because of the weather. It was almost September, but it felt like late June, with a warm breeze coming off the bay and a clear sky overhead. Out here, he was far enough away from the light pollution of downtown that he could even see some stars.

He wondered how Nicola was doing inside. She’d told him to stop by because Tuesdays were usually quiet, and she could often close up around one. No such luck tonight, though.

Batman made a silent adjustment to his position on the roof, so he could stretch out his right leg, which was threatening to fall asleep. He didn’t mind waiting; he didn’t really have anywhere else to be tonight. Nightwing was uptown, scoping out a couple of the Falcones’ favourite haunts, listening and watching to see if he could learn anything about their entanglement with LexCorp, and the two of them weren’t planning to rendezvous until their appointment with Jim Gordon at three. Batman could wait for Nicola. He had little doubt that it would be worth his time.

Nicola always had good information; everybody talked to bartenders, especially ones with pretty brown eyes and a habit of wearing tight, low-cut tops. Unfortunately, she hadn't been working on the night that he was planning to ask about—she took most Mondays off since she worked 24-7 keeping the bar afloat the other six days a week—but she'd promised Batman that her manager was willing to have a conversation about what he remembered. He'd worked that Monday back in January when the first of what Batman was calling the LexCorp Four disappeared just a few hours after leaving the establishment.

Batman exhaled through his nose and watched a few more young people join the line. He was pleased to see the bar so successful. Nicola had worked damn hard since acquiring the Seal from a West Coast real estate developer that had plans of redeveloping the waterfront into a trendy new entertainment district. Gotham had *Gotham-ed* those plans almost immediately, of course. Within a year of the developer gobbling up adjacent properties, five of the derelict sites in the company's portfolio had burned down, targeted by a young gang of arsonists eager to impress Firefly.

The real estate developer had cashed out its insurance claims and sold its only remaining property—a classic Gotham dive bar—to a former drug dealer who had completed her business degree while serving time and was hoping for a fresh start. A Wayne Foundation small business grant and eight years later, and business was booming. The Seal even managed to weather the winter months by building a little community around itself, with karaoke every weekend and weekday events like happy hours, euchre tournaments, and drag bingo on the last Monday of every month.

It was this bingo that had, allegedly, brought 27-year-old former LexCorp employee Blake Hiss here on January 31. According to police interviews with their family and friends, Hiss hadn't told anyone they were going to Gotham City, but that wasn't unusual. Hiss had a habit of taking spontaneous trips by themself; their mother told the GCPD that she often only found out where they'd been months after they got back. This time, however, three days passed without anyone in Hiss' life hearing from them, so they filed a missing person's report.

Eight days later, their body washed up in the harbour. Because Hiss had been confirmed to have been drinking the night they disappeared, the police classified it as 'death by misadventure' and quickly closed the case. Then a coroner in Blüdhaven did what could only be called an autopsy in the loosest sense of the word. The scant report

registered no water in Hiss' lungs, but it concluded that the cause of death was drowning. Hiss' body was released to their family a few days later, along with a recommendation for a good funeral home in Blüdhaven, and Hiss' cremated remains now lay in a cemetery in their hometown just outside Metropolis.

And that... was about all Batman had had to go on since taking the case back in May. He hadn't even confirmed that Hiss had been at the Seal that night until last month; the officer who'd originally led the investigation had apparently made a mistake and written down the wrong bar. (Gordon was now digging into this officer to see whether she'd been bribed.)

Once Batman learned that Hiss had in fact been at the Loose Seal Saloon, he'd reached out to Nicola. Between her criminal record and the Seal's well-earned reputation of a place where queer folks of all stripes were safe, she didn't trust the police. Batman had earned her confidence slowly over the last decade; he paid her well, and he left her name—as well as the names of anyone she associated with—out of any and all dealings he had with the GCPD.

Which was why he was willing to wait for her tonight. He understood how significant it was that Nicola's manager was coming forward. Batman had promised her they could talk to him, that they'd be safe if they told him what they knew. Now he had a duty to keep his end of the bargain, and live up to the faith she'd placed in him.

He'd wait all night if he had to. He wasn't about to let Nicola become another person he let down.

When the bar was finally empty and closed, Batman, Nicola, and Ash, the manager, stood in a shadowed corner of the patio. Nicola had a cigarette, and Ash held a small stack of photos of Blake Hiss that Batman had just handed him.

While he flipped through them, Batman took in the details of his appearance. Ash was a short, skinny man with a pale complexion and white-blonde hair that poked out around the edges of his backwards cap. His arms were covered with tattoos, and his lower lip, septum, and right eyebrow were all pierced. Batman watched the silver lip ring move back and forth as Ash worked it from the other side with his tongue. It was a small, anxious gesture, but not one that indicated deception to Batman's eyes. He suspected it was more so a reaction to seeing the Bat up close for the very first time.

“Yeah,” Ash said after a moment. “Yeah, this is definitely them. They were definitely here that night in January.”

Noting his double usage of the word *definitely,* Batman had to ask. “That was more than six months ago. How can you be so sure?”

“Because they were new,” Ash replied right away. “Most drag bingo nights, especially in the winter, it’s a pretty small crowd of mostly regulars.” He held up a photo of Hiss. “They stood out.”

“And how do you know they were here that particular night in January, and not some other bingo night?” Batman pressed, but gently.

“Icy queen,” Ash said, handing the pictures back.

Batman consciously didn’t change his expression, but Nicola seemed to notice his confusion nonetheless. “The host,” she explained, exhaling a cloud of grey smoke. “Her stage name is I See Queen. We rotate performers, and she did the bingo back in January.”

“And I know it was her January show when Hiss was here,” Ash took over, “because she did a whole bit about freezing rain and high-heeled boots. It was hilarious.”

He smiled towards Nicola, then Batman, like he’d forgotten who he was talking to. A split-second later, his face fell, and he averted his eyes. His lip ring started to move again.

“Do you remember anything else about the night Hiss was here?” Batman asked.

The lip ring moved faster. “Like what?”

“Anything, really,” said Batman, not wanting to lead him towards a certain answer.

Ash looked to Nicola again, more uncertainly this time. Nicola nodded. “You can tell him,” she said softly as she flicked her cigarette over the patio fence.

Ash swallowed hard before speaking. “I remember somebody was following them.”

Again, Batman remained stone-faced, though his heart rate kicked up a notch. That was not what he was expecting Ash to say. He’d been

anticipating a comment about how drunk—or not drunk—Hiss had been when they left, or perhaps something about an altercation with another patron. But this? This had the potential to be huge— the first new lead he'd had since he spotted Cronin and Lavaste being chummy in Metropolis.

"Who was following them?" Batman asked. Ash shrank back, and Batman realized too late that he'd forgotten to moderate his tone. "Could you describe the person?" he added more kindly.

Ash shook his head. "He came in after the bingo wrapped up, and it was busier then, so I didn't get a good look. He was just a face in the crowd, you know?"

Batman waited to see if Ash would go on. When he didn't, he prompted him again. "What about physical features? Anything stand out to you?"

"No," said Ash. "Sorry. He looked... well, straight."

"Light skin?" Batman guessed.

"Yeah."

"Dark hair, or blonde?"

Ash closed his eyes briefly. "Brown, I think. And he had a bit of a beard."

"How about what he was wearing?"

"Blue jeans and a white collared shirt. With a black leather jacket." Ash shrugged. "Sorry. He could be anybody."

"It's okay," Batman reassured him. "How did you know he was following Hiss?"

"I just... you get a feel for it," said Ash. He toyed with his lip ring for a few more seconds. "I assumed he was looking to hook up, but he never bought them a drink, and they never actually talked. Hiss settled their tab and left before closing, and the guy left a few minutes later."

"Have you seen him since?" Batman asked.

"Maybe?" said Ash. He shrugged again. "Like I said, he looked so generic, I could probably pass him on the street and wouldn't

recognize him."

Batman nodded thoughtfully. He was pretty sure he'd gotten everything he could from Ash and Nicola, so he turned toward the latter and reached into a pouch at the back of his utility belt. She smiled, obviously noticing that the wad of cash was bigger than usual, but whatever she said to him was drowned out by a chiming alert in Batman's cowl.

"PERIMETER BREACH," a computerized voice announced, loud and harsh. "SECURITY COMPROMISED. INTRUDER DETECTED."

"B, are you getting this, too?"

That was Nightwing, almost as loud and a lot less calm than the cool, robotic voice of the Batcave's systems.

"Yes," Batman answered him curtly. He handed Nicola the cash before pulling his grapnel gun from a different pouch and aiming at the roof of the Seal. It was a short trip, and he paused there just long enough to silence the alert.

"He does that," he heard Nicola say from the ground.

Batman aimed for the taller warehouse across the street and took off. "Can you reach Agent A?" he asked Nightwing as he flew up through the air.

"No response yet," Nightwing replied.

"Keep trying," Batman ordered, running for the edge of the roof. "I'm heading for the car."

He swung and swooped from building to building, carefully controlling his breathing as he moved, reminding himself that the Batmobile's remote access to the Cave would give him answers soon.

"Still nothing," Nightwing reported. "You?"

"One moment," Batman grunted as his boots hit the ground a little harder than he intended, and his left knee protested with a tiny spike of pain. He ignored it and gave the voice command to unlock the car. He climbed inside, activated the autopilot to drive him home, and accessed the car's computer console.

He found the source of the alert in seconds— it was an exterior sensor,

not the manor's security system. Meaning that whoever had broken in hadn't come through the house.

He silenced the alarms with a few taps to the keyboard, and a few taps more brought up a live feed of the Cave's cameras. He switched from viewpoint to viewpoint, looking both for Alfred and any signs of an intruder, but he couldn't find either. The Cave was empty and, although the Batcomputer screens flashed with the security alert, nothing was out of place... except that the chair at the Batcomputer was rolled out, and there was an abandoned mug on the desk. He zoomed in, waiting impatiently for the image to clear and confirm what he suspected.

Yes, there was still steam rising from the mug. Alfred had been there only seconds or minutes ago, before he left to investigate the alert alone, with only a sleeping teenager upstairs.

A chill ran down Bruce's spine. He tapped more keys, verifying the Batmobile's windows were completely opaque before pulling up footage from the manor's hidden cameras. He rarely checked these; he almost never had a reason to. He flipped through each camera, searching for Alfred, but he wasn't there, and the kitchen terrace door was hanging open.

Alfred's voice came through his ear just a second later. "Sir?"

"Alfred," Bruce exclaimed in relief— damn the rules about real names tonight, he thought, and no one could see or hear him in the car anyway. "Where are you? I can't find you on the security cameras."

"The rose garden," Alfred answered, and Bruce pulled up the feed at once.

"Are you okay?" Dick demanded. "What the hell happened?"

"I'm alright," Alfred assured them both. He sounded a little out of breath, but Bruce could see him on the camera, and he looked fine.

"What happened?" Dick repeated. "Do we need to come back?"

"One of you does," said Alfred, turning and heading back towards the terrace.

"I'm on my way," Bruce said, flipping between cameras to watch Alfred re-enter the kitchen. "ETA is about 15 minutes."

“I’ll be right behind you,” said Dick.

“No, stay where you are,” Bruce told him. “Keep on the Falcones. Gordon’s expecting us at three.”

Alfred slid the terrace door closed, and his eyes found the hidden camera over the fridge. “Yes. Please exit the comms channel, Nightwing,” he added. “Batman and I need to have a word in private.”

“O...kay,” said Dick. A tiny beep signalled his departure a second later.

“Alfred, what’s going on?” Bruce asked once they were alone. “Was there an intruder?”

“No, rather the opposite, in fact.” Alfred paused. “Master Tim has run away, sir.”

Alfred kept talking, but Bruce couldn’t hear him. The chill he’d felt a moment ago had turned his entire body into solid ice.

Helpless, frozen in place, he couldn’t fight the flashback to that day in the Cave when Alfred used those same words about a different kid, and Bruce made a choice— the wrong choice. Bruce had stood at a fork in the road and had chosen the path that led to the Joker instead of the one that led to his son. It was only the first of a dozen wrong choices, but it was the one that doomed Jason long before the Joker beat him and trapped him in that warehouse with his mother.

“Sir? Did you hear me?”

Bruce came back to himself with a ragged breath. The Batmobile was still driving him towards home, and he still had his hands on the computer console keyboard. He could see on the monitor, however, that the kitchen was empty. Fingers numb, he clicked through the cameras again until he found Alfred in the upstairs bedroom hallway, in front of the open door to Tim’s room.

“Yes,” Bruce managed to say, even as another memory threatened to overtake him. “Yes, I heard you. Did he...”

I found this in young Jason’s room a short while ago. It’s a farewell note.

Alfred’s voice in the present overlaid his voice from the past. “Did he what, sir?”

Bruce feared he couldn't get the words out. "Was there a note?" he practically whispered.

"No," said Alfred. "No note. No indication as to where he may have gone."

Bruce took a breath, and then another one. The ice was starting to thaw, the sensation returning to his fingertips.

"Just an empty room?" said Bruce, recalling their trip to Metropolis.

"Let me check," Alfred replied, and he stepped into the bedroom, where there were no cameras.

Tim had probably had another nightmare, Bruce thought with a stab of guilt. Maybe he just needed to get outside and clear his head. Maybe he had just gone for a walk on the manor grounds as he liked to do and accidentally tripped a sensor.

"It's not quite empty," said Alfred, returning to the hall a few seconds later. "He's taken his phone, his backpack, laptop, and both of the cameras we gifted him."

Or maybe he's left for good, Bruce amended silently. Tim had taken his most precious possessions, after all. Maybe he was already on a plane, jetting off to who-knew-where for who-knew-what purpose.

"Okay," Bruce decided, taking manual control over the Batmobile and stepping on the accelerator. He had a clear path this time, a chance to do it differently. "Okay, review the footage from every camera in the manor in the hour before the sensor was tripped. Get Dick to call Barbara. Tell her we need CCTV from every bus station, train station, and the airport. The bridges, too. I'll be at the Cave in five minutes, and I'll get the Justice League satellites positioned to pick up a three-mile radius around the manor. If he's still on foot, he can't have gotten much further than that. If he got in a car—"

"No," Alfred interrupted.

The single syllable stopped Bruce short. "No? Alfred, we have to find him."

"Yes," Alfred agreed. "You do."

Bruce gritted his teeth. "Alfred, you're slowing me down," he growled. "Get to the Cave and start looking at that footage!"

“I will, but only if you stop thinking of this as a case.”

“As a— what the hell are you talking about?” Bruce demanded.

“Master Tim does not need Batman to apprehend him,” Alfred said, every syllable clear and clipped.

“Apprehend?” Bruce repeated, appalled. “Alfred, I would *never—”*

“When he left the penthouse in Metropolis, *Batman* didn’t pursue him,” Alfred went on, overriding him. “Bruce did, because *Bruce* was who Tim needed. The same is true tonight.”

“Alfred, that was different,” Bruce snapped, his face and neck heating under the cowl. “That was broad daylight. In *Metropolis!* This is Gotham, it’s the middle of the night—”

“And Tim needs a parent to come and find him,” Alfred insisted. His breathing hitched. “Dare I say it, that was what Jason needed the day he ran away, too.”

Bruce’s fingers flew to the communicator in his ear. He muted it and let out a frustrated yell. The Batmobile roared back as he shifted into a higher gear, even though he was just around the corner from the Cave now, and he’d have to slow down in less than five miles.

Alfred was right. He always was, even when Bruce wished he wasn’t. Bruce hadn’t just chosen to go after the Joker that day in the Cave when Alfred found Jason’s note. Bruce had chosen to let Batman’s mission take over. And, two days after that choice, when his path crossed with Jason’s in Lebanon.... In the year since, Bruce had buried the memory of Jason’s face falling at the news that Bruce hadn’t come there for him, but now it was all he could see: Jason’s hope, quickly dashed by the coincidence of Batman’s mission intersecting with his own.

And, like thin paper laid over a painting, another image: Tim’s confused eyes looking up at him in a park in Metropolis. *Why did you find me?*

“Because you needed finding,” Bruce repeated, slowing the car as it approached the concealed entrance to the Cave. “Dammit.”

“Sir? Sir?” Alfred was saying in his ear. “Blast it, he hung up on me.”

Bruce reached up and unmuted the mic. “No, I didn’t,” he said softly.

He touched a button in the car, and the fake rock wall before him opened to reveal the tunnel that led to the Batcave.

“I am... relieved,” said Alfred. When Bruce didn’t speak, he added, “I apologize, Master Bruce. That was a low blow. Uncalled for.”

“Perhaps,” Bruce agreed, slowing the car to a crawl as he entered the Cave. “But you were also right.”

“But you already knew that,” Alfred countered. “And you punish yourself enough for it. You didn’t need me to pile on.”

Bruce opened the car door, and Alfred stopped talking. They were face-to-face—or, face-to-cowl—now. Bruce reached up to pull the mask off, and Alfred met his eye with a familiar, serious expression.

“I understand taking refuge in your work,” he said. “I may understand it even more than you do, in fact. Your father was exactly the same.”

Bruce blinked, his fingers fumbling as he began to remove his gauntlets. Alfred stepped forward and helped, tugging them off one at a time.

“But there is a difference between taking temporary refuge and attempting to completely, permanently, close yourself off from the rest of the world,” he continued. “This past week, since you saw that photo of Jason online, that is exactly what you have been attempting to do. And Master Tim is suffering as a result.”

“I know,” Bruce admitted lowly. “And it wasn’t just the photo.”

Alfred glanced up into his eyes again, surprised. Bruce pulled away, unhooking his utility belt and placing it in Alfred’s hands before heading towards the change room.

“Well, perhaps you can tell me the entire story later?” Alfred suggested gently from behind him.

Bruce made a vague sound low in his throat, and closed the door.

Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Nightwing meets with Commissioner Gordon. Bruce finds Tim.

“ETA thirty minutes,” Nightwing said, then he looked around again. “Actually, maybe longer,” he added. “Might take a little tour, get some fresh air.”

“A popular sentiment tonight,” Alfred commented dryly.

Chapter Notes

Recommended soundtrack: Walk Outside, or as I call it, feral cat! Tim's theme song. (Full fic playlist here if you're interested.)

It was quiet enough on the roof of the GCPD building that Nightwing could hear the Gotham Cathedral’s time strike melody to mark the top of the hour. It was followed by three deeper, evenly paced chimes. Then... silence.

Commissioner Gordon was officially late.

Nightwing hopped down from where he’d been sitting on top of the unlit Bat-Signal and began to pace. What was he even doing here, he wondered. He should have gone with Bruce back to the manor. He would have, if Bruce was the only one telling him not to. But with Alfred saying it too, it was a different story.

Still, Nightwing was curious enough that he was tempted to call Barbara and ask her to hack into the Cave’s systems, so he could figure out what the hell had happened, and how Tim had snuck out in the middle of the night. But he knew Babs had to open the library at 7 tomorrow, and his curiosity about possible family drama just wasn’t enough of an emergency to justify waking her up at this hour. So instead, he was up here, waiting to talk to her dad.

The cathedral bells had just played their quarter-past melody when the roof access door finally opened. If Gordon was surprised to find Nightwing alone, he didn’t show it. He just nodded slightly, as if to himself, and walked over to join Nightwing by the Bat-Signal. With the warm weather, he only wore a thin jacket over his collared shirt and tie. His badge was clipped to his belt, and his pistol was in its

holster under his left arm. He had a bagged envelope in one hand and a travel mug that smelled strongly of coffee in the other.

“Evening, Nightwing,” he said. “Or, morning, I guess. Big guy not coming after all?”

“He got called away,” Nightwing replied vaguely.

Gordon nodded again. After a brief pause, he said, “Thought maybe he was still mad at me.”

Nightwing’s curiosity shot up tenfold, but he gave Gordon a winning smile. “Aw, come on, Commissioner, we could never stay mad at you.”

Gordon chuckled. “Speak for yourself, son. Something tells me Batman is more than capable of holding a grudge.”

For what? Nightwing wanted desperately to ask. Instead, he said, “Did you bring the audio files he wanted?”

“Yeah,” Gordon answered. He tucked his travel mug between his forearm and his chest, so he could dig into his pants pocket. “I appreciate you guys asking instead of just stealing them from our servers.”

Nightwing smiled serenely and said nothing.

“Not everybody consented to a recorded interview,” Gordon went on. “Or to an interview at all. Rota’s sister hung up on us whenever we called. Talk about holding grudges.”

“Well, people aren’t at their best when they’re grieving,” said Nightwing, taking the thumb drive Gordon handed him.

Gordon met his eye—white-out lenses be damned—and held it. “Yeah, I know,” he said heavily.

Nightwing looked away. He slid the thumb drive into a tiny compartment on his wrist. “Thanks.”

“Any time,” said Gordon, watching the drive disappear with faint interest. “You really think you’ll find something new?”

“You never know.” Nightwing shrugged. “We’re working some new leads now, so—”

“So, it’s good to review the old stuff with fresh eyes,” Gordon finished

for him. “I get it.”

“Thought you might,” said Nightwing. “And, hey, speaking of— any chance I can get a look at the pictures that Bug sent you?”

“You read my mind, kid,” said Gordon. He shifted his coffee around again and got a grip on the clear plastic evidence bag. “Here. Batman stormed off before I could give them to him. I would’ve put them in the mail, but…”

Nightwing snorted and took the bag. “Thank you,” he said. He glanced down and noticed there were three stuffed white envelopes inside, not just one. “Did Bug send you the pictures one at a time, or…?”

Gordon swallowed a mouthful of coffee. “No. They’ve sent me two more packages in the time since I talked to Batman.”

“Two more?” said Nightwing. He opened the bag and carefully extracted the envelopes. “Why didn’t you tell him?”

“Because they had nothing to do with the LexCorp case,” said Gordon, shrugging his shoulders. “It’s just petty stuff. An arsonist down by the docks, and a couple of guys casing a bank.”

Nightwing opened the first envelope and blinked in surprise. “These are in colour,” he observed.

“Yeah,” said Gordon. “Both of the later sets of pictures are. They’re cheap print-outs, as far as we can tell. Bug could have had them printed anywhere, but maybe you guys can see something we missed.”

“We’ll try,” Nightwing murmured.

He started flipping through the pictures. Just like Gordon said, the first set showed a young woman entering a rundown warehouse with a gas can just after dark. The second showed two shady-looking characters lounging against a wall across the street from First Gotham National Bank in the middle of the day.

“Did these lead anywhere?” he asked once he’d seen them all.

“Sure did,” said Gordon. “We caught the arsonist the morning after we got those, and it’s a good thing, too. She had a list of targets as long as your arm, and she wasn’t on our radar at all.”

“Huh,” said Nightwing, impressed. “And the bank?”

“We alerted the branch manager and set up extra patrols in the area. Last night, they made their move, and we were ready.”

“Nice,” Nightwing commented.

“Yeah.” Gordon drank more coffee. “Bug’s really stepped up their game in the last week.”

“The last— wait, all three of these packages came to you in the same week?” Nightwing asked. Gordon nodded. “Last week?”

Gordon nodded again. “I talked to Batman a week ago Monday. That was when we got the pictures from the break-in at Dr. Marcus’ house. Then we got the bank shots on Thursday and the arsonist pictures on Saturday.” He paused, obviously noticing Nightwing’s troubled expression. “What?”

“Nothing,” said Nightwing quickly, shaking his head. “I thought it’d been longer since you met with Batman, that’s all.”

“Feels like longer,” Gordon admitted with a sigh.

Nightwing huffed a laugh and dropped the photos back into the bag. “Well, thanks, Commish,” he said, stretching out his free hand for Gordon to shake. “We’ll let you know if we find anything new in the interviews, or in the pictures.”

“Sounds good,” said Gordon, stepping back. “And tell Batman...”

Nightwing waited a beat, but he didn’t go on. “Tell him what?”

Gordon shook his head and waved a hand towards the side of the roof. “Never mind. Take it easy, kid.”

Nightwing nodded. He pulled out his grapnel gun with one hand and aimed for the edge of the next building. The plastic evidence bag flapped in the breeze as he moved. He headed southeast, landing on lower and lower rooftops until he was only a short fire escape up from the alley where he’d parked his bike.

He climbed down and unlocked his bike’s storage compartment. He opened it and set the bag of photos inside, then hesitated. He re-opened the bag instead, and pulled out the envelopes of photos once more.

One set of glossy, high-quality black-and-white photographs, and two

sets of matte colour shots that could have been printed at any Gotham bodega for less than five dollars. There were hundreds that offered that service. Bug could have even printed the pictures on their own machine at home. But if so, they'd never done it before. With the exception of one digital delivery, the photos had always been black-and-white, like the pictures of the break-in at Dr. Marcus'.

Which begged the question: why would Bug suddenly change their habits?

Speed was one obvious factor. Since Bug was apparently in a hurry to get these shots to Gordon, they'd opted to print them quicker and faster. But the speed of the delivery marked another change in their MO. Up till now, evidence that Bug provided had always been periodic— occasional and intermittent. Nightwing would have to check the Batcomputer to be sure, but he was almost positive that Bug had never delivered more than one evidence package to the GCPD in such a short timeframe.

Which raised another question: what had made Bug so desperate to deliver evidence—*this evidence*—so quickly?

Nightwing sighed. He didn't have any answers. He put the photos back into their envelopes, and the envelopes back into the evidence bag. He'd have to analyze the pictures in the Cave and see if he could get any clues as to where or how they'd been printed, then see if that gave him a lead. In the meantime, however, he had more pressing concerns.

He glanced around again to be sure he was alone, then tapped the communicator in his ear. "Nightwing to Agent A."

"Go ahead, Nightwing," Alfred replied immediately.

"What's the situation?" Nightwing asked.

"Everything is under control," said Alfred. "Return at your leisure."

"Copy that. ETA thirty minutes," Nightwing said, then he looked around again. "Actually, maybe longer," he added. "Might take a little tour, get some fresh air."

"A popular sentiment tonight," Alfred commented dryly. "Get in contact if you need us."

"Understood," said Nightwing, and something in him relaxed at

Alfred's use of the word *us.* Whatever had happened tonight, they were all there now. Dick's family was safe.

He disconnected and pulled his helmet out of his bike's storage compartment. Before he put it on, he spared a glance up— the moon was waning, high in the sky but heading west, heading to bed. Nightwing had to admit the moon had the right idea.

He wondered, as he started the engine, what he would find when he got back to the Cave, to the manor. He still didn't know exactly what had happened, but Alfred had promised him a longer explanation soon.

For now, though, it was enough. He drove slowly through the grey predawn light, keeping an eye out for trouble along the way just in case. It was only when he left the city limits that he shifted into a higher gear and pressed down on the accelerator. His pulse jumped as the bike picked up speed— electrifying. Familiar.

Home.

Tim still kinda couldn't believe that it worked.

It had taken a little longer than planned— he'd needed to hack the system and make it erase the use of his 4-digit keypad code from the security system's log, so he could be out and back without anyone knowing that he was gone. He'd tested it three times to make sure it was doing what he wanted it to do, and he'd been interrupted even more often by Alfred coming to check on him. Luckily, Alfred only opened his door a few inches, so it was easy to feign sleep, then wait for Alfred's footsteps to disappear before picking his laptop up off the floor and starting again.

It was worth it: he had not only deactivated the manor's security system, but also erased all trace of him having done so, *and* it would reactivate the system after a delay of fifteen minutes. (Tim didn't want to leave Bruce's house unprotected, but he did want to give himself plenty of time to get out, just in case.)

Best of all, if Bruce took a cursory glance at the logs, he would see no sign of the manipulation. If he dug into it, there might be something— Tim had taken his usual precautions to avoid leaving fingerprints, but he wasn't perfect, and he wasn't Batman. That being said, he hoped Batman wouldn't have a reason to dig into it, because his exit had been perfectly smooth. Batman would never even know he was gone.

Now, he just had to get to the carpool parking lot by the bridge, where he would call a cab to pick him up and take him into the city. It was a long walk, but it was worth it not to draw attention to the fact that a teenaged boy was leaving Wayne Manor in the middle of the night. If Tim's cab driver decided to sell that story to a reporter to make a quick buck... Tim shuddered. He didn't want to do anything that would put Bruce under the scrutiny of the media or—god forbid—the police. Bruce had done a near-perfect job of protecting his identity all these years; Tim wasn't going to screw it up for him now.

Hence, a forty-five-minute walk in the middle of the night. He wished he could listen to music or something to help the time pass, but he had the live audio feed of the GCPD radio playing in one earbud, so he'd know roughly where to go find Batman or Nightwing once he got to the city. They were both out, he was sure: earlier, one report of a 383 (vigilante activity) had come from uptown just seconds before there was another in the Cauldron. Unless Batman could teleport (and Tim was pretty sure by now that he couldn't), there were two vigilantes on patrol tonight, and Tim was determined to find them.

At least it wasn't raining. It was actually a really nice night to be out: it was warm, and the moon, shrinking after being full last week, was high in the sky. Tim could hear lots of crickets in the grass, their chirps forming a chorus that reminded him a little of ocean waves, cresting and falling over and over again. It was a peaceful undercurrent to the steady sound of his sneakers hitting the pavement.

For only the second time since he'd left the manor, headlights appeared in the distance. Tim shuffled aside, trying to get out of their line of sight. He didn't want to appear as either a target or a threat, so it was easier to just not be seen at all. He was pretty sure people driving around Gotham City knew better than to stop and offer a ride to a stranger, but he also didn't want to advertise how young he was, in case a driver looked at him and saw an opportunity. It was a hard line to walk, but he'd had plenty of practice at it, being a kid out and about after dark in Gotham. He was surprised, actually, at how easily he'd fallen back into these habits in the last week.

As the lights of the car passed, and Tim moved back onto the paved shoulder, he didn't need to check the time on his phone to know how long he'd been walking, or how far he'd gone; the car's headlights had illuminated the wrought-iron gate to his parents' property just ahead.

Years ago, when Tim was small, they'd had a light and an intercom, but as Tim got older, and his parents started to travel more, they let a

lot of that go. The gate light was driving up the electricity bill, his father said, and the intercom was a waste since everyone had cell phones anyway. So now the gate just stood there at the edge of the road, tall and dark like the entrance to a cemetery... or a prison.

Tim found his feet slowing as he approached. The gate was on the opposite side of the road, so he couldn't see the address plaque from here. He could, however, see that his dad's luxury SUV was parked out front of the house, and that a handful of windows on both the ground floor and the upper level of the manor were illuminated.

He knew what that meant: his parents had an early flight. He wondered where they were going this time. He wondered what he would be doing if he still lived with them. Would he be waiting in his room, desperate for them to leave, so he could get in a little Bat-watching before sunrise? Or would he have snuck out earlier in the evening, trusting that they wouldn't check his room before they left?

There was a knot of complicated feelings in his chest as he slowed to a stop. If he squinted, he could almost make out a figure passing in front of the upstairs windows. That was probably his mother. She was particular about how things went into their suitcases. One time, when Tim was about seven years old, she'd left him unsupervised in her bedroom because he wanted to help her pack and he promised he'd 'do it right, like a grown-up.' Needless to say, it didn't go well, and from then on, he was banished from his parents' room when they were gearing up to go, even if all he wanted to do was hang out with them as they packed up to leave again.

The wrought-iron bars of his parents' front gate turned white suddenly, washed in headlights coming from the other direction. Tim shook himself and moved further onto the shoulder before he started to walk again. He kept his face turned away, so he didn't seem interested in the car or driver as it passed, but, to his surprise, the car didn't pass. He chanced a glance from the corner of his eye and saw that the car had pulled onto the opposite shoulder and stopped.

"Shit," he said under his breath, and he hunched his shoulders as he quickened his pace.

Behind him, a car door opened, then closed. Tim glanced around. Beside the road was mostly open field— not many hiding places there. Ahead of him, still almost two miles away, was the bridge. He knew there was a little footpath that led down to the river; could he make it that far before the car or driver caught up with him?

There were footsteps on the pavement. He was out of time. Tim took hold of his backpack straps, getting ready to run. Then—

“Tim?”

Tim stopped dead in his tracks at the familiar voice. It couldn’t be.

“Tim! Is that you?”

It was. But *how?*

A car drove by in the opposite direction, going slow— no doubt because of the parked car with its headlights still on and the two figures on the road. Tim turned slowly, watching Bruce appear behind the car as it passed. Bruce jogged across the lane to catch up with Tim, even though Tim hadn’t moved a muscle in close to a minute.

“Tim, what are you doing out here?” Bruce asked when he reached him.

What are you *doing out here?* Tim almost said back— because seriously, where had he come from?! The last 383 Tim heard on the radio was less than an hour ago. Had Bruce come back from patrol early, leaving Gotham in Nightwing’s hands?

But even if he had, how did he know where to find Tim? How did he even know Tim was gone?

It didn’t matter. Here he was, wearing the same clothes he’d worn at dinner, staring at Tim on the side of the road. In the ambient light from the car headlights, Tim tallied up the signs in a fraction of a second: his tone was elevated, there was a crease between his brows, and his eyes were narrow.

Not angry, Tim concluded. Inconvenienced, and probably annoyed. Frustrated that Tim had dragged him out here, away from what he was supposed to be doing tonight.

“I— I don’t know,” Tim managed to answer after a minute. He winced as he said it, though, because he knew it was the wrong answer, but it was all he had. It wasn’t like he could tell Bruce the truth, after all.

Bruce pursed his lips, then glanced behind him. When he turned back to Tim, the crease between his eyebrows was gone. He exhaled through his nose and put a hand on Tim’s shoulder, bending down enough to look him in the eye.

“Buddy, you know you can’t see them without Lillian’s supervision,” he said.

Tim blinked. The words caught him off-guard. Did Bruce really think that he’d come out here in the middle of the night to try and see his parents?

He did, Tim realized. He did, and Tim… Tim could *use* that.

“I know,” Tim replied, suppressing the little voice in the back of his head that felt guilty about lying to Bruce like this. “I didn’t think they were home.”

Bruce nodded slowly. Tim could see the gears turning behind his eyes. “You just wanted to see the house, but then they were actually here,” he deduced. “They’re home, and they haven’t reached out for a visit.”

Tim dropped his eyes to the pavement. The little voice at the back of his head was getting louder, and shame twisted his insides as he let Bruce build the narrative.

“Okay,” Bruce sighed, straightening up again. “Come on. It’s late, you should be in bed. We’ll talk about this more tomorrow.”

Tim didn’t move. Even as Bruce tugged on his shoulder slightly and let go, beginning to turn toward his car, Tim stayed rooted to the spot, hearing a different voice layered over Bruce’s words, matching them almost exactly.

I’m not doing this now, Timothy. Go to bed, I’ll deal with you tomorrow.

Surprise and disappointment stung in his chest. So they’d finally gotten here, he thought. They’d had a false start after Metropolis, and Tim thought he could get away with breaking Bruce’s rules again, but it had caught up with him.

He should’ve known better. He should’ve known that sneaking out of Batman’s house in the middle of the night was a line that he couldn’t cross.

It was okay, he told himself again, even as his eyes started to burn and his throat felt like it was closing up. It was okay. He’d planned for this. He had contingencies. He had the lawyer’s phone number. He wouldn’t be in the system for much longer. He could do this. He didn’t need anybody else.

Still, it hurt so much more than he thought it would to watch Bruce walk away from him.

“I’ll just go,” he said out loud. Bruce turned back with a questioning look. Tim swallowed around the lump in his throat and forced himself to keep talking. “I don’t have to stay at your house tonight. I’ll call Lillian, maybe she can pick me up.” He pulled his backpack off his shoulders and bent down, digging through it to find his wallet. His hands, he noticed, were shaking. “I’ll get a cab to her office, actually. That’s probably easier—”

“Tim,” said Bruce. He was in Tim’s space again, crouched on the side of the road. His hands were suddenly over Tim’s hands, steadying them and gently taking them off his backpack. “Hey. Tim, look at me.”

Tim raised his head slowly, afraid of what he might see. But Bruce still didn’t seem angry.

“I am not kicking you out,” he said clearly. “If you want to leave, we can talk about that. But I’m taking you home to the manor tonight. Okay?”

Tim stared, then slowly nodded. Bruce’s shoulders relaxed just enough for him to notice.

“You will have a home at the manor as long as you want it,” he said. He glanced away, then pulled his gaze back to meet Tim’s eyes again. “I’m... sorry if I haven’t made that clear to you. Especially recently.”

“It’s okay,” Tim said automatically.

Bruce’s mouth twisted. “It’s really not,” he said. “But we’ll work on it. Tomorrow, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Tim said quietly.

Bruce smiled and moved, but it was kind of weird. He moved forward, his arms opening like he was going in for a hug, but he had too much momentum or something, and when Tim shifted back, startled, Bruce ended up wobbling in his crouched position, his knees shaking. He shot a hand down to the pavement to stabilize himself.

It was incredibly not-graceful— Tim didn’t think he’d ever seen Bruce look less like Batman.

“Sorry,” Bruce muttered, as he pushed himself up to his full height.

“I’m.. tired. But, do you want a hug?”

“Um,” said Tim. “I think I’m good.”

“Right,” said Bruce, just as awkward. “Let’s go home, huh?”

“Okay,” Tim said, and he followed Bruce to the car.

The gate to Drake Manor shone again in the headlights as Bruce did a U-turn. The reflection was so bright that Tim lost sight of the light in his parents’ bedroom. When he glanced back in the rearview mirror a moment later, he saw that it had already gone out anyway.

Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

> *Tim was grounded, so that meant... well, to tell the truth, he didn't really know what it meant. Bruce hadn't exactly spelled it out during the short car ride back to the manor at three in the morning.*

Tim slept late the next day, late enough that the morning coffee aroma had already permeated the upstairs. He could smell pancakes, too, which made his stomach growl, but he suppressed it ruthlessly. He knew that by the time he could smell what Alfred was doing in the kitchen, mealtime had passed. And there was no way Alfred had saved him a plate. Not when he was grounded.

He lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling, wondering what to do, what was allowed. Obviously he needed to eat, and he had to pee— he'd have to leave his room soon. But was he allowed to eat downstairs? Did he need to bring a plate up? But if he did, what about the dishes? Making Alfred make multiple trips up and down the stairs seemed like Bruce punishing the wrong person, but Tim was grounded, so that meant... well, to tell the truth, he didn't really know *what* it meant. Bruce hadn't exactly spelled it out during the short car ride back to the manor at three in the morning.

"I am not going to kick you out," he said again, "and we'll talk about it more tomorrow, but I hope you understand that there have to be some consequences for this kind of action."

"I understand," said Tim. (He didn't.)

Because the consequence (grounding) seemed to imply that Bruce wanted him around *more,* which really didn't align with what Tim thought he knew about grown-ups and what happened when they were mad at him. So he was confused about that, and also confused about what exactly he would be doing while he was grounded during the two weeks before school started. Would Bruce put him to work around the house? Was he supposed to help Alfred more, or mow the ginormous yard or something? Tim didn't know.

Regardless, Tim had nodded along like he understood, and when he did, Bruce took his eyes off the road to look over at him. Tim clocked his tense shoulders, his tight grip on the wheel, and the way his jaw was set like stone.

Expecting a fight, Tim concluded. Was Tim supposed to give him one? Was that how teenagers normally reacted to news that they were being grounded? Maybe if Tim knew what it meant to be grounded—maybe if he'd ever actually been grounded before—he would have, but he didn't, and he hadn't, so he didn't say a word, and after a moment Bruce focused on driving again.

Now, Tim wished he'd argued. Not because he disagreed with Bruce deciding to punish him for sneaking out of the house after midnight—he *was* still wondering how Bruce managed to get back in time to catch him, though—but because he thought maybe he'd have been able to gather more information that way. If, for example, he'd said it was unfair that he wouldn't be allowed to leave the manor for the next ten days, maybe Bruce would have explained that he actually wasn't allowed to leave his room except for food and bathroom breaks. If Tim had complained that he needed to see the latest episode of something-something show he was watching, maybe Bruce would have declared that there was to be no use of his electronics at all until school started.

It was a moot point now. As Tim stared up at the ceiling, he thought about going downstairs, finding Bruce, and picking a fight just to get some clarification, but, honestly, that sounded like a lot of work. He let his eyes drift closed again instead. He'd get up soon and head downstairs for a bowl of cereal or something, but for right now—

A knock on his door startled him. "Timmy?" called Dick's voice from the hall. "Are you ever getting up? Alfred saved you some buttermilk pancakes, but I gotta say, they're starting to look pretty tasty..."

Tim huffed a surprised laugh and got out of bed to open the door. Dick's bright grin was waiting for him.

"There he is," he said. "I knew that would work."

"You did?" asked Tim.

Dick crossed his arms smugly over his chest. "The threat of missing out on Alfred's food almost always does the trick."

"Almost always?" Tim repeated.

"Bruce is sometimes immune," Dick explained. He shook his head and sighed. "Not a normal bone in that man's body, I swear."

Tim laughed again, and it reminded him that he had to pee. Luckily,

there was no need to find an awkward way out of the conversation, because Dick was already stepping back from his door.

“I’ll put your pancakes in the microwave for you,” he said, heading for the stairs. “But you better hurry.”

“I will,” Tim promised, and then he did just that.

When he walked into the kitchen a few minutes later, Dick was the only one in the room. He glanced over at Tim as he took a plate of too-fluffy-to-be-real pancakes out of the microwave.

“Ah, dammit. You actually came,” he said seriously, and it took Tim a second to catch on that he was kidding. He smiled and followed Dick to the table, where maple syrup, a bowl of strawberries, two mugs, and a carafe of coffee were already waiting.

“Where’s everybody else?” Tim asked, taking his seat and reaching for the syrup.

“Alfred’s in the garden,” Dick answered as he poured them both some coffee. “And Bruce took off a few hours ago. Said he needed to talk to some people.”

“That sounds ominous,” Tim commented before he could stop himself.

Dick just smiled some more. “So it’s just you and me. What do you want to do today?”

Tim’s heart sank. Dick must not know, he thought. Why would he? Bruce would have had no reason to tell him. And besides, officially, Dick had been upstairs sleeping through the entire ordeal last night, so even if he *did* know about what went down, he’d have to play dumb this morning and pretend that he didn’t.

“I can’t do anything,” Tim told him, biting the bullet and confessing the embarrassing truth. “I’m grounded. So I guess after breakfast I have to go back to my room.”

He poked at a pancake with his fork. Suddenly they seemed a lot less appetizing. He waited for Dick to say something— to ask why, or to express sympathy, or maybe even to suggest that he could ignore the grounding for now, since Bruce and Alfred weren’t around.

But when several seconds passed without a word, Tim glanced up to find Dick watching him with an expression of mild confusion on his

face.

“Did Bruce *say* you weren’t allowed to leave your room?” he asked.

“No,” Tim admitted. “But I’m grounded, so—”

“So you can’t leave the grounds,” Dick finished, then chuckled. “You’re grounded to the grounds.”

Tim was too distracted to appreciate the slight joke. “That’s it?”

Dick shrugged. “If B didn't tell you otherwise....”

“What about TV?” Tim asked, because that *couldn’t* be all there was to it. “Or the computer?”

“Again, did he say that?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Then you’re in the clear,” Dick concluded cheerfully. When Tim continued to stare, he sobered and leaned in across the table. “Trust me,” he said. “I’ve been grounded many times—both metaphorically and literally—and B never forced me to sit in my room and stare at the wall for days on end. You’re a kid who messed up, not a criminal at Blackgate.”

“Right,” Tim said slowly, thinking back to his early suspicions that, if Batman was aware of what he’d been doing and what all he knew, he’d feel differently.

Then something Dick just said caught up with him. “Wait, what do you mean, *literally* grounded?”

“Chandeliers,” Dick explained with a grin. “I’d show you, but even the ones B had reinforced probably wouldn’t take my weight anymore. That being said,” he added after a beat, “I still have a set-up in the fitness room if you want to see some tricks.”

Oh hell, yes! Tim’s brain shouted. “Sure,” he said out loud, ten times calmer. “I’d love to see.”

Then a thought occurred to him. Part of the reason he’d wanted to go Bat-watching last night—other than the fact that he desperately missed doing it, of course—was to test his new cameras and lenses to see if they could keep up with Batman and Nightwing. If Nightwing was offering...

“Can I take some pictures?” he blurted before he could overthink it (more than he already was).

“Okay,” Dick said, not missing a beat. He grinned again. “Been a while since I showed off for the paparazzi.”

Tim laughed around a mouthful of pancake. Dick’s words were truer than even he knew; Tim had often thought of himself as the paparazzi for Batman and his allies— except that they never saw him, obviously.

He hurriedly finished his breakfast and coffee, then raced upstairs to get dressed and grab his camera. *Cameras,* actually— he took both the old film camera and the Canon that Dick had given him for his birthday. Dick met him in the hall a few minutes later, having ducked into his room to change into workout clothes.

“Ready?” he asked. Tim nodded and switched his camera bag to the other shoulder.

“I’ve never been to the fitness room,” he said, following Dick down the stairs. “Where is it?”

“It’s in the public wing, actually,” said Dick, heading that way. “Not that the public ever sees it. It’s just where there’s the most space.”

“Oh,” said Tim. “Cool. This place is so much bigger than I thought.”

“Yeah,” Dick agreed. “I keep forgetting that you’ve been here before.”

“Only sort of,” said Tim, remembering a handful of galas that he’d attended before his parents decided he was old enough to leave unattended at home and started travelling a lot more. “You guys always had the, uh, thingies up whenever I was here for an event.”

“The thingies?” Dick repeated.

Tim’s face heated, embarrassed to have forgotten the word, but he laughed it off. “Yeah, you know, the... thingies? The thingies that keep people from wandering all over the house?”

“Oh, the thingies,” said Dick, laughing as well. “I know the thingies.”

“I’m sure they have a name,” said Tim. He’d search it on his phone if he didn’t have his hands full. Dick just shrugged.

“Let it be a mystery,” he said. “The manor has tons of them, actually. I used to get lost all the time, and Jason—”

He faltered, his voice and his steps pausing for a moment. Tim nearly bumped into him, but Dick recovered and moved fluidly out of the way.

“It’s okay,” Tim told him, after they'd been walking again for a few seconds. “You can talk about him. I don’t mind.”

Dick shot him a quick sidelong smile that was tinged with sadness. “I was just gonna say, he found a whole library once that Bruce didn’t even know existed.”

“Whoa, really?” Tim replied.

“Yeah,” said Dick softly. “You could always trust Jason to find books.”

Tim was silent for a moment. He wondered if this was the opportunity he’d tried to create a week before, when Bruce came back late from the office, and Alfred had had to assure Tim that Bruce wasn’t mad at him. Maybe Alfred had been the wrong person to bring it to; maybe instead, he could tell Dick that he’d changed his mind about reading Jason’s book, and that he really wanted Alfred to put it back where it belonged.

But before he could say anything, Dick said, “Here we are,” and opened the double doors in front of them.

The fitness room was big, but not as big as Tim expected, honestly. It actually reminded him a lot of the darkroom, with an attached bathroom, a large central area, and a corner that was set off on its own. In the darkroom, that corner had a sofa and a lamp; here, there was a treadmill, stationary bike, and a small weight bench. The largest part of the room looked like a gymnastics centre, with floor mats, parallel bars, and a balance beam. Plus—Tim’s heart skipped a beat to see it—a trapeze bar hanging from the ceiling.

“Whoa,” he heard himself say again.

“Pretty cool, huh?” said Dick. Tim just nodded.

“Wanna try some things?”

It took Tim a moment to process the question. “Sorry— what?”

“I can teach you some basics,” Dick explained. “But I don’t know if you’ve ever had any interest in gymnastics? I know you’re in swim classes right now, but maybe when school starts again—”

“Yes,” said Tim, because his brain had finally caught up to the conversation. “I mean, yeah. I’d love to try some things. If you don’t mind teaching me,” he added quickly.

Dick grinned. “Well, normally I’d charge you,” he said, “but Alfred’s cooking is payment enough.”

Tim grinned back. “Awesome,” he said honestly.

When Bruce returned to the manor in the early afternoon, the family wing was empty and quiet. He’d waved to Alfred on his way by the garden, where Alfred was up to his ankles in clippings from the hydrangea bushes, but he hadn’t bothered to stop and ask him where the boys were. He didn’t think he needed to; Tim was grounded after last night’s escapades, and Dick knew better than to sneak him out behind Bruce and Alfred’s back... so where were they?

After checking the bedrooms, he paused by the hall that led to his study. *Dick wouldn’t have taken Tim downstairs, would he?*

Surely not. Surely Dick had more common sense than that— more common sense than *Bruce* had had when Jason had first come here. And, given how angry Dick had been when he found out what Bruce had done, there was no way.

Dick had been right, of course. Bringing Jason into the Batcave so early was possibly the greatest mistake Bruce had ever made, and he’d live with its consequences for the rest of his life.

You did the best you could with the knowledge you had at the time, he heard his therapist, Gianna, say again. Going to see them this morning was long overdue, but at least he’d gotten there, and he would be going again next week, same day, same time.

If the boys weren’t in the family wing, he thought, then they had to be in the public wing. But where—? Ah. Bruce went straight to the fitness room. Sure enough, the double doors were open a crack. Bruce crept forward until he could see and hear what was going on inside.

Tim was bent backwards, his hands almost to the floor behind him. Dick was in full coach-mode, with one hand just under Tim’s knees, lifting them up, and the other steadying Tim’s arms as they took more of his weight.

“Okay, so this is why I recommended we start with the headstand,” he

was saying, as Tim wobbled, his face turning red.

“You were... probably right,” Tim managed to reply.

Dick lifted Tim’s legs and held him upside down. “This is the half-way point,” he said. “Not too late if you want to stop here.”

“No... way,” said Tim, probably through gritted teeth.

Dick laughed. “Okay then,” he said. “Here we go!”

He guided Tim through the rest of the walkover. His legs hit the mat one after the other, and Tim unbent to stand up straight. When Tim’s hands dropped to his sides, Dick grabbed them and tugged them back up.

“Always finish with a flourish,” he advised. “Smile and wave to the audience!”

Tim’s face was redder than ever, but he was smiling, and he even raised a hand in a half-hearted wave. When he turned towards the door, Bruce leaned back, making sure he stayed out of sight.

“Well, you’ve officially done a back walkover now,” he heard Dick say. “It’ll help you learn a back handspring later like you wanted. How do you feel?”

“Honestly? A little sick,” said Tim. Concerned, Bruce looked through the crack in the doors again to see him place a hand on his stomach. “Alfred’s pancakes and going upside down aren’t a good combination.”

“Ooh, yeah,” said Dick with a grimace. “Guess we should’ve waited a little longer, huh?”

“It’s okay,” Tim said quickly. “Now I know for next time.”

“Next time?” Dick said at the exact moment that Bruce was thinking the same thing.

“I mean— uh,” Tim stammered. “Not that you have to— you know. But—”

“You want to get good at it,” Dick guessed. When Tim shrugged, he added, “I’ll teach you, don’t worry about it. But I do want to know: why a back handspring? Why not something else? Something easier?”

Tim shrugged again and mumbled something too quiet for Bruce to make out. Luckily, Dick laughed and repeated it.

"Because it looks cool is a perfectly valid reason to want to learn how to do something," he said. "Trust me, half the things I tried as a kid were because somebody else made it look really cool."

Bruce smiled, remembering Alfred's constant sighs and his repeated refrain of *Monkey see, monkey do, Master Bruce.*

"But yeah, let's let the pancakes settle a bit more, and then maybe we can try again," Dick said. "In the meantime, I think I promised you a show?"

Bruce leaned in a little, watching. It was always a treat to see Dick perform— especially when there was no threat. Which was rare, nowadays. Almost every time he got to see Dick like this, it was in a fight. Even training sessions together more often than not involved sparring. To see Dick swing from the trapeze, or bounce around the mats with no violence factoring into it at all? Bruce couldn't remember the last time that had happened, and that was a shame.

A *click!* distracted Bruce, pulling his eyes away from Dick. He spotted Tim with his father's old camera, moving around the room like a pro, snapping pictures as Dick moved from one position to another, both on the ground and in the air. Bruce reminded himself to ask about the pictures later, maybe once Tim had had a chance to develop them.

For now, however, Bruce just left him to it, and backed away from the fitness room as silently as he'd arrived.

By the time he returned to the family wing, Alfred had come in from the garden and was preparing lunch in the kitchen— turkey sandwiches and a salad of leafy greens, by the look of it.

"Just you and me for lunch, I think," Bruce advised as he took a seat at the kitchen island.

"Oh?" said Alfred.

"Yeah," said Bruce. He told Alfred where he'd just found the boys and recounted what he'd overheard about Tim and his recent pancakes.

"Well, I must admit I am relieved," said Alfred.

“Relieved?” Bruce repeated.

“That Master Tim emerged from his bedroom,” Alfred clarified. “I wondered if, out of embarrassment over what happened last night, he would revert to the way he was during his first week here. Remember how we almost never saw him?”

Bruce nodded slowly, though his thoughts spun like a hurricane inside his head.

“He’s come a long way,” Alfred said, and he went back to washing romaine lettuce under the tap.

For a moment, the running water was the only sound in the kitchen. Bruce watched Alfred work and thought about everything that had happened since he heard the perimeter breach alert in the cowl last night. He thought about the moment of panic that had flooded him when Alfred told him Tim had left— he and his therapist had revisited that moment in all its painful detail this morning. He thought about Alfred’s tough love last night, his advice about Tim needing a parent. He thought about how he’d tried to be that parent when he found Tim standing on the side of the road in front of Drake Manor at 3 in the morning, and he thought about Tim’s reaction.

“Alfred,” Bruce said, but then stopped.

Alfred shut off the water and turned, drying his hands on a towel. “Yes?”

He waited, ever patient, for Bruce to speak again. “What I told you last night. About the… it wasn’t the picture.”

“Yes,” Alfred said again, thankfully not needing a more detailed reminder.

Bruce swallowed. He’d said this to his therapist this morning, he could say it again. Alfred deserved the truth. Still, it took him another minute to get the words out.

“Last week, I forgot… about Jason.”

Alfred merely stared. The silence lingered until Bruce managed to break it again.

“I was about to leave the office. Then Sam told me about AJ, and I pulled out my phone. I was… I was gonna text him.” He lifted his

shoulders in a tiny shrug. “I forgot,” he whispered.

When he glanced up again, Alfred’s eyes were shining. He said nothing, however.

“I fucked up,” Bruce admitted. When Alfred opened his mouth, he went on. “So many times this week, Alfred, I... I wasn’t what I needed to be. I wasn’t who Tim and Dick needed me to be.”

“You took refuge in your work,” Alfred said, just like he’d said last night. Bruce shook his head, because that was a lie— or, not the whole truth, at least.

“I told myself it was the work,” he confessed. “But I was running.”

Alfred sighed and crossed the kitchen to place a hand on his arm. “I’ve said this before, but I’ll say it again. You are not perfect, Master Bruce. And grief... no one is capable of perfection when we’ve lost someone we love.”

“I don’t care about perfection,” Bruce said.

Alfred gave him a skeptical look. Bruce rolled his eyes.

“Okay, maybe I do,” he amended. “But what I mean is, I know I’m not a perfect parent. I’m not even all that great, but I was trying to be good, at least. Good enough to give Tim something better than what he had before, and— oh,” he interrupted himself.

“Solved something, have you?” asked Alfred wryly.

Bruce’s thoughts still had some spinning to do, but he nodded. When he’d spoken with his therapist this morning, they told him he seemed fixated on the fact that Tim had snuck out in the middle of the night to return to Drake Manor. Bruce had deflected that comment, because he didn’t know what to do with it, but now he was beginning to understand.

“He’d rather go back to his parents than stay here,” he said.

“The devil you know?” Alfred suggested.

“Maybe,” Bruce conceded. “This last week, I— dammit. I wasn’t any better than them, was I?”

“You were in the country,” Alfred reminded him pointedly.

“But I wasn’t really here, either,” said Bruce, thinking of the lit windows of Drake Manor.

Alfred pulled out the stool beside Bruce and took a seat. “You’re here now,” he said, with a lot more certainty than Bruce felt. “I think it would be best to treat what happened last night as a wake-up call, for both you and Tim. He now knows that the kind of behaviour he engaged in at previous homes will not be tolerated here. And you now know that—”

“That he needs me here,” Bruce interrupted. He recalled Tim’s certainty that Bruce was going to kick him out. “And that he needs to hear that we want him here.”

“Indeed we do,” said Alfred. He smiled. “I must admit I’ve grown quite fond of the lad.”

“Me too, Alfred,” Bruce agreed. He thought for a moment, however, then asked, “You don’t think I was too hard on him, do you? Two weeks is a long time.”

“Well,” said Alfred, which usually meant *yes.* “As I said, it is a wake-up call.”

“I really thought he’d argue with me,” Bruce went on. “Dick and Jason always did. I’d say two weeks, and they’d knock me down to one.”

“Or less,” Alfred said, getting to his feet again. “I seem to recall Master Dick being grounded for all of 24 hours on more than one occasion.”

“Only because I’d need physical restraints to get him to hold still any longer,” Bruce remarked.

“Yes. Flying Grayson indeed,” Alfred agreed, and Bruce chuckled.

Alfred went back to the salad, filling the kitchen with the sound of running water again. Bruce waited until he was finished washing the lettuce, then glanced over his shoulder to make sure they were in no danger of being interrupted.

“Can you walk me through what happened again?” he asked. “Because I checked the security system logs, and I don’t see any record of Tim deactivating it. According to the logs, it was never turned off in the first place.”

“I’m afraid I can’t speak to the electronic anomaly,” said Alfred, “but

I'd verified Tim was asleep in his bed several times before heading downstairs. I'd been there perhaps an hour when the perimeter alarm sounded."

"So you went back up," Bruce guessed. Alfred nodded. "Did you check his room right away?"

"No," Alfred replied. "Given that the alert was an outside sensor, I first verified that the major entrances were locked and secured. Then I activated the exterior lights, to see if anyone was approaching the manor. I watched and waited for perhaps three minutes, then I went upstairs and found Master Tim's bed empty."

"Hm," said Bruce. "And that was when you took the back-up comm from my study?"

"Yes," Alfred confirmed. "I hurried back down to the kitchen and went out into the gardens, thinking that perhaps Tim would be nearby. I called for him, but I had no response."

"The sensor he tripped was way out at the edge of the property line, near the road," Bruce pointed out.

"I wasn't aware of that at the time," said Alfred, a touch defensive.

"I'm thinking Tim wasn't, either," Bruce said.

Alfred nodded as he sliced sourdough bread and a tomato from the garden for their sandwiches. Bruce continued, laying out his theory of the case by long habit.

"He did something to the manor's security system and thought he was in the clear. The exterior sensors are on a different network, and they're well-hidden. He would have had no way of knowing he'd set it off." Bruce paused. "No wonder he wasn't running."

"Drake Manor is only a mile away," Alfred mused. "Perhaps he thought he could visit his parents and return before dawn."

"I think that's likely," said Bruce, but he frowned.

Alfred glanced up from the sandwiches and noticed his expression. "What is it?"

"I'm just wondering how I'm going to explain it," said Bruce.

"Mustard or mayonnaise?" Alfred asked, pointing to each jar in turn.

“And explain what?”

“The exterior sensor,” Bruce replied. “Mustard.”

Alfred nodded. “It would not be unusual for a man of your status to have a secondary alarm system,” he said. “But I don’t know that you need to offer Tim any explanation at all.”

Bruce raised an eyebrow. Alfred laid turkey and tomato on top of the layer of mustard.

“It would be easier to let him think he failed in his attempts to manipulate the security system,” said Alfred. “He hasn’t confessed to doing so, has he?”

“No,” Bruce admitted.

“Well, there you are, then.” Alfred sliced Bruce’s sandwich in half and passed him the plate. “The simplest solution, as ever, would be to play dumb.”

Bruce took a bite of his sandwich, turning the matter over in his mind as he chewed. Alfred was right: it *would* be easier to let it blow over, let Tim’s manipulation of the security system pass without comment, but—

“I want to know how he did it,” Bruce said. Alfred shot him a startled look, and Bruce dialed back the Batman that had crept into his voice. “If it weren’t for the exterior sensor, Alfred, we never would have known he was gone. I built my systems from the ground up. It shouldn’t have been possible for him to play with even the civilian system like that.”

“Did he not express an interest in computing?” asked Alfred, now slicing his own sandwich in half.

“Well, sure,” said Bruce, “but what fifteen-year-old can re-code something to make it seem like he was never even there?”

“An excellent question.” Alfred turned away to pick up the salad bowl and added, “It would seem that Master Tim has some hidden skills that may prove useful.”

Bruce scowled at Alfred’s back. “I can see where you’re going with this, and my answer hasn’t changed.”

“Nor am I suggesting it should,” said Alfred, unfazed. He placed the bowl of salad near Bruce’s plate and poked a set of tongs into the greenery.

“Then what are you suggesting?” Bruce asked, annoyed by his airy tone.

“I am suggesting that Master Tim would benefit from putting his skills to good use,” said Alfred. “He needs a project, as so many boys his age do, and he needs someone to trust him enough to do it.”

Bruce was about to ask if Alfred’s proposed *project* involved putting on a costume, but a noise by the stairs told him that Dick and Tim were on their way back from the public wing. So Bruce settled for a glare instead. Alfred smiled back at him and started slicing bread for more sandwiches.

As the boys came into the kitchen, however, Bruce let the glare drop. He intentionally smiled at both of them— Tim looked a little unnerved but smiled back after a second. Bruce asked Dick where they’d been and what they’d been up to all morning. When Dick started to explain, Bruce listened, nodded, contributed.

You’re here now, he heard Alfred say again. So he was.

Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Tim and Bruce have an interrogation a conversation over dinner. Dick discovers his new favourite source of entertainment.

"I wasn't going to see my parents," Tim interrupted, the words bursting out all at once. Even he seemed surprised to hear them.

"You weren't?" said Bruce. Tim shook his head. "You lied to me?"

Tim waited impatiently for Pat to emerge from the bathroom. A couple of boys shot him funny looks as they passed him by, but Tim ignored them, instead raising one foot to the locker room bench to tie the laces on his sneaker. He glanced at his watch while he did so, and hoped he wasn't keeping Alfred waiting in the parking lot. After all, they were on a tight schedule: he'd have to get Tim to the manor, so Tim could get something to eat, then drive him all the way back into town for his Spanish conversation class at the library.

Finally, Pat came out of the stall, fully dressed. "So, Douglas was a fake name?" Tim asked them, as if almost ten minutes hadn't passed since they were last talking about this.

Pat laughed. "That's right," they said. "His real name was Birdy Edwards, and he used to be a detective in Chicago."

"Okay," Tim said with a nod. "And the dead guy that Barker found dead at Douglas' house— or, Edwards' house, I guess. That wasn't actually him?"

"Yeah. The dead guy was actually Ted Baldwin, who'd broken in to try and kill Edwards. Edwards killed him instead then swapped clothes with him to make everyone think the murder attempt had succeeded. Then he went and hid."

"And Holmes figured that out?" asked Tim, as they both finished packing up their towels and swimsuits.

"Not exactly," Pat replied. "Edwards just kind of appeared and was like, *Hey guys, I'm not actually dead! Here's a written account of what happened to me."*

"Oh. Well, that's anticlimactic," Tim remarked, genuinely

disappointed. He'd been hoping to hear about what techniques Holmes used to piece together the fakery, especially before crime scene forensics were really a thing.

"Yeah, kinda," Pat agreed, shrugging their backpack on. "But if it makes you feel better, Edwards does end up dead at the end, and nobody knows who did it."

"Really?" said Tim, picking up his bag and following Pat out of the locker room towards the exit. "How did he die?"

"He was on a ship. He went overboard and drowned."

"Somebody pushed him?" Tim guessed. "And Holmes has to, like, interview the crew and figure out who wanted him dead?"

"Mm, not exactly," said Pat again. They stepped out onto the sunny sidewalk, holding the door open for Tim to come after them. "More like Barker just tells him about it."

"So Barker is involved, and now Holmes has to prove it," Tim concluded.

"Uh, no," Pat laughed. "Holmes thinks Moriarty killed Edwards and made it look like an accident, but he has no way of proving that. He swears that he'll bring Moriarty down, and that's the end of the story."

"That's the end?" Tim repeated incredulously. "Wha— you can't just leave it like that!"

"Blame Doyle, man, not me," said Pat with a shrug.

Tim exhaled in a huff. Pat laughed at him for another moment, then raised their arm to wave towards their mom's SUV.

"Hey, before we go, I wanted to ask if you wanted to come over for dinner and a campfire next Sunday night?" they said. "A bunch of my aunts and uncles are coming, and my cousins. It's Labour Day, so it's kinda like the last big thing of the summer, you know? Mom said I could invite a few friends if I wanted to."

Tim winced. "Aw, I'd love to, but I'm actually grounded, so I can't. Sorry."

"You're grounded?" said Pat, sounding outraged on his behalf. "For what?"

“It’s a long story,” said Tim, shaking his head. “But yeah, I’m grounded till school starts.”

“Well, shit,” Pat said. “That really sucks.” When Tim nodded, they added, “I’ll text you pictures?”

“Sure,” said Tim with a smile. “Burn a few marshmallows for me.”

“Yeah,” said Pat. They looked again to their mom’s SUV. Tim turned that way, too, and noticed the brown sedan a few spots over. “Well, we’d better—”

“Yeah,” Tim agreed, following them. “I guess I’ll see you on the first day of school?”

“Definitely,” said Pat. “Let me know if your... jailer lets you out early, and you can come to the party after all.”

Tim laughed. The hesitation was normal, ever since their first interaction where Pat referred to Bruce as Tim’s dad without knowing the truth, but the word they used instead of ‘dad’ changed every time now.

“Will do,” said Tim. “See you.”

“Bye,” said Pat, and they separated to go to their cars.

Tim opened the back door of the sedan and tossed his backpack in without looking, then opened the passenger door and climbed in. It was only when he buckled his seatbelt that he realized that Bruce was driving, and not Alfred as he was expecting.

“Oh,” he said in surprise. “Hi.”

“Hey,” said Bruce with a warm but slightly awkward smile. “How was swimming?”

“It was fine,” Tim answered, a little hesitantly.

“Did your instructor do anything special for your last class?”

Tim shrugged. “She tried really hard to convince us to come back for the next session. Does that count?”

Bruce chuckled. “Suppose it does,” he said as he started the engine. “So, where would you like to go for dinner?”

Tim was thrown by the question. “Uh, we aren’t going back to the manor?”

Bruce shot him a puzzled look, then quickly redirected it into a shoulder check as he pulled out of the pool parking lot. “We always go out for dinner on Thursdays.”

Did he forget? “I’m grounded,” Tim reminded him.

Bruce’s lips twitched towards a smile. “Yes, I’m aware.”

“So…” said Tim slowly, but Bruce didn’t jump in. Tim was getting déjà vu, thinking back to his conversation with Dick yesterday morning. “So, am I *allowed* to go out for dinner? What with the grounding and all?”

“If you were going out with your friends, then no,” said Bruce. “But I’m taking you, so it’s fine.”

“Huh,” said Tim, processing this. He wished for one second that Bruce was aware Tim knew his secret, so he could make some comment about Bruce thinking he was above the law.

“Besides, with rush hour traffic, we’d never make it all the way home and back in time for your Spanish conversation group,” Bruce went on. “It’s much more practical for us to just go out.”

“Okay,” said Tim, still confused.

“And,” Bruce added suddenly when they hit a red light a moment later. “And I’m sorry… that I missed this last week.”

Tim got the distinct impression that Bruce was watching him out of the corner of his eye. He didn’t say *It’s okay,* because he had a feeling Bruce would tell him it wasn’t. Instead, he just nodded.

The light changed. The car moved forward. “So, where would you like to go for dinner?” Bruce asked again.

Tim smiled and thought about the Chinese restaurant two blocks away that was run by someone with ties to the West Coast mafia. “How about burgers?” he said instead.

“I know just the place,” said Bruce, and he pulled into the right-turn lane.

The waitress had just taken their orders. Tim was toying with his straw, swirling it around in his glass. Bruce watched as some bubbles clung to the straw and others rose to the surface. He took a sip of his own drink—club soda with a wedge of lemon—and cleared his throat.

“Tim,” he began. Tim raised his head, his blue eyes huge. “Can we talk about what happened on Tuesday night?”

Tim gulped and nodded. He nudged the soda glass a few centimetres away, like he was consciously depriving himself of something to fidget with, and sat up straighter in the booth.

“I called Lillian yesterday,” Bruce told him. “She said your parents have left the country again, but she did speak to them via email and suggested they set up a visit when they return in a couple of weeks.”

Tim nodded again, but his eyes had dropped. One of his hands came up from below the table, and he touched his napkin-wrapped fork and knife, straightening them.

“I’m sorry they haven’t reached out,” Bruce went on. “Really, Tim, I am. I know you wanted to see them.”

A muscle twitched in Tim’s jaw. It almost looked like a flinch. Bruce hesitated before he went on. He didn’t want to get Tim’s hopes up, but the kid had a right to know.

“Lillian said there was a possibility of a video call,” he said. “If your parents are in a place with good enough service, you can chat with them, with Lillian on the line as well. I know it’s not the same as an in-person visit, but—”

“I wasn’t going to see my parents,” Tim interrupted, the words bursting out all at once. Even he seemed surprised to hear them.

“You weren’t?” said Bruce. Tim shook his head. “You lied to me?”

There was that almost-flinch again. “I didn’t— I didn’t *lie,”* Tim muttered, pulling his soda closer again. “I just... didn’t correct you when you... assumed.”

“Uh huh,” said Bruce. He put a hand over his mouth, because amusement was an inappropriate reaction right now, but that was some flawless teenager logic right there, and he almost had to admire it.

“I’m sorry,” Tim said to the table. Bruce lowered his hand.

“Well, thank you for your honesty,” he said. “Even if it is a little late.”

Tim shrugged his shoulders, but he also sagged in obvious relief. Bruce glanced around the diner, choosing his next words. He’d really thought that Tim’s escape attempt had been about his parents, but if that wasn’t the case, then he had a slightly more complicated path before him. He still didn’t want to reveal that he knew about Tim’s nightmares—he remembered how it felt to be a kid afraid to go to sleep—but he hoped that Tim would tell him himself if Bruce gave him the right opening.

“Can you tell me where you were actually going?” Bruce asked after a moment.

All of Tim’s tension returned at once. His fingers twirled the straw more aggressively, stirring up bubbles in the cola, and he refused to look up. Bruce waited, even though it took him a long time to answer.

“Out,” he said finally. He lifted his shoulders. “I just… wanted out.”

“The same way you wanted out that day in Metropolis?” Bruce prodded gently. “Or at the other foster homes?”

Tim nodded without a word.

Bruce decided to try the direct route. “Can you tell me why?”

Tim kept silent. Bruce gave him another minute, then moved on, from *the reason* to *the result*. As Gianna put it yesterday, that was the bigger problem (and the primary source of the panic he felt that night).

“Okay,” he sighed. “I could give you a lecture about how unsafe Gotham City is at night, but I know you already know that, because you’ve been doing this for a while now, haven’t you?”

Tim shrugged.

“You’ve kept yourself safe so far,” Bruce said, waiting for Tim’s nod, though it took longer this time, like he had to think about it. “So you probably think you’re pretty invincible, don’t you?”

At last, Tim raised his eyes. “Oh,” he said softly.

“Oh?” Bruce repeated.

“This is about Jason,” Tim said.

Bruce’s heart stuttered in his chest, but he nodded.

“I’m sorry,” said Tim again. “I didn’t... I didn’t think about that.”

“I know,” Bruce managed after a difficult moment. “And you shouldn’t have to, but...”

His words ran out. Fortunately, the waitress was just a few steps away with their plates, so he hitched up a smile, thanked her by name, and assured her that they had everything they needed. Tim watched this transformation with blatant fascination, not even glancing down at his food.

“I’m really sorry,” he said after the waitress had left. “I shouldn’t have made you worry. Again.”

“My kids are always gonna make me worry,” said Bruce, and he saw the exact moment his words sunk in— Tim’s cheeks went red, and he picked up his knife and fork as an excuse to look away. “But, going forward, I would appreciate it if you took up some slightly less dangerous hobbies. Okay?”

Tim nodded. “Got it. More swim class, less night photography,” he mumbled, but Bruce heard him anyway.

“Photography?” he repeated. “You take pictures when you go out at night?”

“Uhhh,” said Tim. The way he was squirming reminded Bruce a little of a trapped animal. Or a cornered criminal, but Bruce shoved Batman’s analogy aside. It wasn’t useful here.

“That sounds creative and challenging,” said Bruce. “Maybe we can find a way for you to do it more safely.”

Tim stared, his eyes wide. Bruce gave him an encouraging smile, thinking back to what he’d seen in the fitness room yesterday. “I’d like to see some of your shots sometime. If you’re willing to show me.”

After another minute of staring, Tim nodded, then gave his full attention to the plate of French fries before him. Watching him, Bruce was thrown back to their very first night at the manor, when he’d asked what Tim was interested in.

And, actually, speaking of what they'd talked about that first night—

"I have one more question about Tuesday, Tim," he said casually, as he reached for the ketchup.

Tim looked up like he expected a bolt of lightning to strike him down from on high. He swallowed hard. "Okay...?"

Bruce smiled. "What exactly did you do to my security system?"

Bruce called it *co-operating for a lesser sentence.* Dick called it *hilarious.* Bruce's face journey as a 15-year-old explained how he'd outsmarted the manor's security system was Dick's new favourite show.

"Next time I get sad, I'm just gonna remember this moment," he murmured to Alfred, whose moustache definitely did not twitch as he stayed focused on his knitting.

Bruce and Tim been at it for almost an hour now. At the start of that hour, Dick had assumed that Tim had just gotten lucky when he'd managed to sneak out of Batman's house and get all the way to the main gates before tripping a sensor and accidentally letting everyone know he was gone. Now, Dick knew better— Tim wasn't the luckiest kid on the planet, but he might be one of the smartest.

A lot of the technical jargon went over Dick's head; he was tempted to secretly record the conversation and get Babs to explain it to him later. He himself was no slouch when it came to technology, of course, but there was a big (and boring) difference between doing cool things with computers and listening to people talk about doing cool things with computers.

"It took me a while to figure out the code for getting the system to re-arm itself after fifteen minutes," Tim said, running his finger along a line that Dick was too far away to read. "Eventually, I decided to just tweak what was already there."

"Tweak what was already— oh, you mean the code that gives us enough time to clear out when we set it?" said Bruce.

"Yeah. It usually waits five minutes, so all I had to do was change the command, like—"

Dick stopped listening again, dropping his eyes to the Bat-tablet in his hands. He was breaking Bruce's rules, carrying it around upstairs all

willy-nilly, but Dick was banking on Bruce being too busy with his other rule-breaker tonight to pay him any mind, and flipping through mugshots was painfully boring without something playing in the background.

Earlier, while Bruce and Tim were at dinner, he'd scanned Bug's photos of the break-in at Dr. Marcus' house and run them through the Batcomputer's software to zoom in and enhance the burglars' faces as much as possible. The GCPD had done the same, of course, but facial recognition had turned up bupkis. The Batcomputer had access to a few more databases, and while it was chugging away downstairs, Dick had decided to compare the burglars to still images captured from his mask footage last night, to see if anyone going in and out of Falcones' favourite haunts looked familiar.

Unfortunately, he had no luck. Either the burglars weren't part of the usual crowd, or they were laying low. Or... Dick frowned. Maybe the Falcones had already tied up that loose end. After all, the cops were made aware of the break-in at Dr. Marcus' house pretty soon after it happened—*thank you, Bug*—and it was very possible that the Falcones decided not to take a chance on the burglars getting caught and telling the police more than they already knew. Dick made a mental note to cross-reference missing persons' reports filed in the last week, just in case. No matter what kind of choices the burglars had made in their lives, if they disappeared, someone might be looking for them.

"Fifteen minutes is a long time," Bruce observed, once the code-talk had died down enough for Dick to tune back in.

Tim didn't reply, and Dick looked up in time to see Bruce cross his arms over his chest. He knew what question was coming next, and he decided to head him off before he got there.

"Yeah, *we* only need five," he called across the den. "Tim can't be expected to find his way out of the manor that fast. Not without the thingies."

"Thingies?" Bruce repeated, while Tim's face turned beet red.

"Stanchions," he said. "The word I was looking for was stanchions."

"I prefer thingies," Dick said with a shrug, and went back to what he was doing.

In his peripheral vision, he watched Bruce clock the tablet, exhale through his nose, and turn back to Tim. He also saw the smile playing

at the corner of his mouth, though, no matter how much Bruce was trying to hide it.

“Anyway, yes. I altered the original code to give myself more time,” Tim explained. “I figured it would be safer than trying a new command that might not work.”

“Because if it didn’t work, it would set off the alarm the second you opened the door,” Bruce concluded. “Essentially, you tricked the system into thinking that you’d set it.”

“Well,” Tim hedged, and Dick looked up to see him squirm. “Technically, I did set it. Just... not in the typical way.”

“Right,” said Bruce. Dick recognized the look on his face because he’d seen it many times before: Bruce was trying to seem stern, but he was actually surprised and impressed. “Because once you’d deactivated it via the keypad, you also programmed it to re-arm itself, and to erase the user data of the code that deactivated it.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” said Tim with a shrug, like this tricky bit of coding was something anyone could do.

He edged to one side of his chair to make room for Bruce, who was leaning in to peer over his shoulder at the laptop. As he did, Tim sent Dick a nervous glance. Dick gave him a big thumbs-up in return. Alfred *tsk*ed, but Tim fought back a laugh, so it was worth it.

“Since you changed the actual command, does this mean that the system has waited fifteen minutes every time I’ve set it since Tuesday night?” Bruce asked, leaning back.

“Well,” Tim said again.

“Tim,” Bruce began. “If it’s off for ten minutes longer than it’s supposed to be, that’s not safe.”

“No,” Tim jumped in. “No, it’s not. It’s back to five minutes.”

Bruce folded his arms over his chest again. Even Alfred was watching the show now.

“I fixed it,” Tim explained in a rush. “I put back to normal pretty much right away.”

“I see,” said Bruce.

Tim's shoulders relaxed, but Dick knew the odds of Bruce leaving it there were exactly zero. Sure enough—

"And how soon is *pretty much right away?"*

"Uh," said Tim again, looking down. "Kinda... when you told me to go to bed on Tuesday night?"

Bruce stared, then let out the longest breath known to man. He raised one hand and rubbed at the space between his eyebrows. Dick covered his mouth to keep from laughing and glanced at Alfred, who was also fighting back a smile.

"That was at 3:30 in the morning, Tim," Bruce observed, his eyes now closed.

"It only took half an hour," Tim said, his tone like an apology.

"Okay," said Bruce, apparently accepting it. He dropped his hands to his sides. "Show me again how you got in?"

While they dove back into the technical stuff, Dick went back to the tablet. He flicked through all of Bug's photos again— the ones from Dr. Marcus' place as well as the others that had already resulted in arrests. He hadn't told Bruce yet about how busy Bug had been in the last week, and he kind of thought he wouldn't bother. Like Gordon had said, it wasn't related to the LexCorp case, and Bruce clearly already had enough to worry about.

"One week instead of two," he was saying on the other side of the room. "Does that sound fair?"

To Dick's surprise, Tim didn't agree right away. "Actually. I was wondering if maybe I could go to a party on Labour Day weekend instead?"

"Will wonders never cease," Alfred said under his breath. Dick nodded, pressing his lips together to keep from smiling as he pretended to focus on the tablet when Bruce glanced in Alfred's direction. Maybe he'd heard what he said, or he was looking for advice.

"What kind of party?" he asked Tim.

"Um," Tim began.

Dick shook his head. *Not a chance in hell, kid,* he thought.

“A very supervised party?”

Dick glanced up to see Bruce’s eyes narrow. Before he could ask, Tim explained.

“It’s at Pat’s house. Their mom and dad will be there, and, like, aunts and uncles and cousins. It’s a big dinner thing and then a campfire in the backyard. With marshmallows,” he added, like this was a selling point.

Which was fair, Dick thought. Marshmallows were pretty awesome.

“And you won’t mind if I call Pat’s parents to verify all this?” Bruce asked.

Tim nodded, then shook his head. “I mean, no, go ahead.”

Bruce assessed him for a moment. “I’ll think about it.”

Tim sighed in relief, and, honestly, so did Dick. *I’ll think about it* was Bruce-speak for *Yes, but I have to at least pretend that ‘no’ is on the table.*

“Good job, Timmy,” Dick said, too quiet for Tim and Bruce to hear. Beside him, Alfred nodded, also looking very impressed.

“But first, I want to know if you can make some improvements to the security system,” Bruce added, gesturing towards the laptop.

“Okay,” said Tim, pulling the computer closer to him. “What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to make it so that nobody can hack it the way you did.”

His hands on the keys, Tim looked up. “Nobody?” he repeated.

“Well, nobody who isn’t you,” Bruce amended.

Was it Dick’s imagination, or was he smiling as he said that?

Poor Tim just looked confused. “That... might take a while,” he said, cautious. Dick could tell he was wondering if his party plans were in jeopardy.

“Until school starts, at least,” Bruce agreed, and his eyes went, strangely, to Alfred. “It’s a project.”

Alfred smiled down at his knitting. Dick sent Bruce a question with his eyebrows, but Bruce ignored him and went back to Tim. He gently nudged the laptop away from Tim's hands and closed it.

"No need to get started tonight," he said, firm enough that Dick knew what he was really saying.

Clearly, Tim did too, because got to his feet. "I'm gonna get ready for bed."

Smart kid, Dick thought again, raising one hand to wave when Tim said goodnight a second later.

Bruce stayed in the middle of the den until Tim's footsteps faded, then his shoulders slumped, and he walked over and flopped down in the armchair to Dick's left. For a long moment, the click of Alfred's knitting needles was the only sound. Then—

"At least he's not swinging from the chandeliers," Dick said brightly.

Bruce sighed, but he smiled, too.

Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

> Tim teaches Dick how to develop pictures... and maybe some other things too, by accident.
>
> *Tim looked up and found Dick studying him. With the deep shadows of his safety glasses forming its mask-like shape, Tim thought about how he was face-to-face with Nightwing... who had been asking him very pointed questions about photography for the last half an hour or more.*

“So, you expose each strip of the image to the light a little longer than the one before?” asked Dick.

Tim glanced over at him. The bright yellow-white light of the enlarger was reflected in Dick’s safety glasses as he watched Tim move the cardstock down the print an inch or so at a time.

“Shorter,” Tim corrected him, “but yes.” The timer beeped, so he took the card away entirely, exposing the final stretch of the print for the last five-second interval. His strips probably weren’t perfectly even, but it would be good enough.

When the timer chirped again, he turned the enlarger off. It took a second for his eyes to adjust to the dim red safety light, but he knew his way around, even in the dark. He carried his print to the shallow basins set up on the adjacent countertop.

“And now we do chemistry again,” said Dick, as Tim dropped the print into the developer solution. “How long?”

“Sixty seconds,” Tim told him, and Dick hit the timer. In this light, his hair and eyebrows were pitch black. Everyone looked a little frightening in red light, but with the deep shadows caused by his safety glasses, Tim couldn’t help but be reminded of Nightwing’s domino mask. (If Tim didn’t already know who he was, he’d probably have figured it out today.)

He pulled his eyes away from Dick and followed his gaze down to the basin. He reached out and tilted the basin slightly, letting the solution run over the surface of the print.

“Okay, that’s pretty cool,” said Dick, as the picture began to appear from nothing.

Tim nodded. He kept tilting the tray, gentle and slow, until his inner timer told him it was about time, then reached for the developer tongs. Sure enough, the timer rang two seconds later.

“Now the ten-second one,” Tim instructed Dick, who nodded and hit the button when Tim dropped the print into the stop bath.

After its short dip, the print went into the fixer for thirty seconds, then spent two minutes in plain water. Tim pulled the image out and let it drip for a moment before clipping it to the wire.

“We can turn the light back on now,” he said, after confirming that his photo paper was sealed in its light-tight wrapper. Dick disappeared from his side to hit the switch.

No matter how many times Tim had been through it, the return of real light was a bit of a shock. Dick was obviously feeling it, too, given how much he was blinking as he walked back over to check out the finished product.

“Nice,” he commented. “So, what now?”

“Now we look at the strips and decide which amount of exposure time would be best,” Tim explained, peering at the image. He pointed toward a certain pair of strips without touching the print. In the real light, his gloves were blue again, not washed-out grey.

“That’s ten seconds,” he said pointing first to the left strip and then the right. “And that’s fifteen.”

“Ten’s good,” said Dick, “but fifteen’s better.”

“Fifteen might be a touch too long,” Tim countered. “Let’s try twelve or thirteen.”

“Twelve,” Dick said quickly. When Tim raised his eyebrows, he added, “Thirteen is bad luck.”

Tim chuckled. “Twelve and a half?”

Dick grinned. “Sure. You set the timer, I’ll get the lights.”

They started the process again, this time letting the enlarger stay on for the entire time instead of short intervals. Once Tim had dropped

the print in the developer tray, and they had sixty seconds to wait, Dick spoke again.

“Do you have to do a test strip for every single picture?”

“Not if your pictures are all taken under similar conditions,” Tim answered. “The light in the fitness room didn’t really change while we were in there, so my shots will probably all need about the same time. If one or two turn out bad, I’ll redo them with more or less time. I can always burn or dodge, too, if certain spots need it.”

“You lost me,” said Dick. “Burn, like fire? And dodge, like—” He shimmied his shoulders side-to-side. Tim laughed.

“Not exactly,” he said, and he explained both processes. He got through another print before he was finished, with all the questions Dick stopped him to ask.

“I never knew developing pictures was so complicated,” he said finally.

“Be grateful we’re not working with colour,” Tim replied.

“Oh? Is it a lot harder?”

“You have no idea.”

“What’s so different about it?”

“You mean, other than everything?” Tim pulled his print from the stop bath just as the ten-second timer went off. Once he got in the rhythm like this, it was almost muscle memory. “You have to work in complete darkness for starters.”

“Really?”

Tim nodded, his eyes on the print currently in the fixer solution. It captured Dick mid-somersault, easily one of the best shots he’d ever gotten of Nightwing, and the only one in good lighting without his mask, of course. As great a shot as it was, however, seeing Dick perform in the fitness room the other day had brought back older memories— of seeing Dick at the circus and, later, wearing the Robin colours.

“Have you ever done it?” asked Dick, when Tim didn’t say anything.

“No,” Tim answered, shaking himself out of his thoughts. “And, before

you ask, I couldn't do it here even if I wanted to. You need different equipment."

"Huh. Like what?"

It took three more prints' worth of time for Tim to explain as much as he could about working with colour, even though he was far from an expert. The process was highly technical, and so much of it had to be learned through trial and error that Tim felt at times like he was just guessing. Dick was a good audience at least, listening attentively and reacting at all the right parts, and not once telling Tim to stop rambling on about geeky stuff the way other people had.

But Tim did have to wonder why Dick was suddenly so interested. Was it genuine, or was he still trying to cheer Tim up because he was grounded? Or maybe Bruce had sent him here to distract him from something Bat-related that was going on. Tim couldn't even begin to guess.

"So, if you did want to get these printed in colour," Dick said, "could you just, like, go somewhere and pay someone to do it?"

"Yeah," Tim answered. "I'd take the negatives to a studio or something. But it'd take a little while, and it'd be expensive." He took the next print to the developer bath and dropped it in. "It's worth it, of course, if that's what you want."

"Have you ever done that?" Dick asked, his eyes not leaving the picture that was emerging from the white void on the print.

"No," said Tim, gently tilting the tray back and forth. "When I want colour, it's so much easier to just go somewhere and pay for prints of my digital shots."

Dick raised his head. Tim looked up, too, and found Dick studying him. With the deep shadows of his safety glasses forming its mask-like shape, Tim again thought about how he was face-to-face with Nightwing... who had been asking him *very* pointed questions about photography for the last half an hour or more.

"What?" Tim said, making a conscious effort not to squirm under Dick's attention.

"Nothing," Dick answered at once. He smiled. "Just thinking about how I could have been asking Donna about all this instead of pestering you."

Tim forced himself to smile back. He was positive that that wasn't at all what Dick had been thinking about. Thankfully, the timer went off, and he moved automatically, fishing the print out of one tray and sliding it into the next.

"You're not pestering me," he said. Dick pressed the ten-second timer. "You're helping."

Dick chuckled easily. If Tim wasn't Tim, and if Dick wasn't Dick, he might not have noticed that something was off about it.

"Good, I'm glad," said Dick. "This has been really fun. I'm learning a lot."

I bet, Tim thought, hoping his smile looked genuine while his mind was reeling.

The possibility that Dick knew or suspected that he'd been a police informant for the last few years hadn't been top of mind for Tim lately. Not since that morning he showed Dick the pictures from Metropolis. He'd been so careful back then... but today he was talking a mile a minute, telling Dick absolutely everything he wanted to know and probably more. It was like not seeing Dick for almost a month and then suddenly spending time with him around the manor while he was grounded the last few days had led him to let his guard down.

He had to wonder if that was the point. Who even knew what kind of intel Dick had just extracted from him without Tim even knowing?

His thoughts flashed back to his dinner with Bruce on Thursday. Bruce had been unable to get a straight answer from him about why he'd snuck out in the middle of the night— though he'd gotten way more than Tim had intended to give him. (He had a feeling he'd regret that 'night photography' slip-up more and more each day.) Still, the conversation had been a dead end. But Bruce wasn't one to give up easily, and he no doubt knew how much Tim liked and respected Dick, so was it really so far-fetched to think that he'd sent Dick to the darkroom today to find out more?

Tim felt the walls closing in as he finished the print he was working on. His heart was beating faster and faster, his palms growing sweaty inside his gloves. He had to force his hands not to shake as he pulled the print from the fixer bath and set it in the wash tray. As soon as Dick set the two-minute timer, Tim pulled his gloves off and set his safety glasses aside.

“Can you pull it out and hang it up when it’s done?” he asked, as calmly as he could. “I have to go to the bathroom.”

“Sure,” said Dick.

Once he’d locked the bathroom door behind him, Tim leaned against it, breathing deep and fighting back the wave of panic that was getting bigger and bigger the longer he let himself look at it.

He closed his eyes. *Damage control,* he thought. How was he going to get out of this? How much *this* was he even in? He’d come to accept the idea that Bruce didn’t actually know about his hobbies, but what if he was wrong? What if his foster placement here really *was* about keeping an eye on a possible threat after all?

He didn’t know. And he couldn’t find out— not without coming clean and telling Dick (and Bruce) everything.

The only way out was through, he decided. He couldn’t change what he’d already revealed, but he *could* make sure he didn’t give anything else away.

He flushed the toilet without having used it and washed his hands at the sink. There was a red light in here, too, to prevent light contamination when entering and exiting the room. He barely recognized his own shadowed face in the mirror. He made himself smile at it anyway.

Tim emerged from the bathroom and somehow, miraculously, managed to get through another half-hour of developing pictures with Dick without accidentally incriminating himself. (Or... incriminating himself *further?* He refused to dwell on that possibility.)

Finally, they were ready to turn on the main light again. Together, they tidied up and poured the chemical solutions into plastic jugs that would eventually be taken to the dump for proper disposal.

While Tim put away their gloves and glasses, Dick wandered towards the seating area in the front corner of the room. With Alfred’s encouragement, Tim had gotten some of his recent photos printed and stuck them to the walls. Some were from before—pictures of his friends from Gotham Academy before he left his parents’ house and changed schools—and some were newer.

“Is this Pat?” Dick guessed, pointing to a shot of Pat at the arcade in Kingston.

“Yeah, that’s them,” Tim confirmed with a smile.

“Where was this taken?”

Tim told him. Dick seemed mildly interested to hear that Kingston had a new arcade, and they went on a little tangent about local landmarks: Tim explained where it was, and Dick told Tim about the diner that used to be there. Then he moved to another photo— a little more daring, because it was one of the rooftop shots he’d captured the night he’d told Bruce he was going to the movies. (Not the one with the Bat-Signal, though. Tim wasn’t that brave and/or stupid.)

“I love this,” said Dick, after staring at it for a moment. “The way the sunset is hitting the water? It’s gorgeous.”

“I got lucky,” Tim said with a shrug. Dick gave him a skeptical look.

“People would pay money for stuff like this, Tim,” he said. When Tim waved him off again, Dick raised his phone and snapped a picture of the photo.

“What are you doing?” Tim asked.

“Sending a picture to Donna,” Dick answered, already typing. “She’ll back me up, you’ll see.”

Tim laughed, not convinced. “Sure, okay.”

“Also, now I can set it as my wallpaper,” Dick added, swiping at the screen.

Tim smiled, but his face was warm. “Here,” he said, struck with an idea. He reached for the picture and gently tugged, unsticking the tape that held it to the wall. Once he had it in his hand, he went to the small end table beside the armchair and opened the top drawer. He pulled out one of the envelopes he kept in there and slid the photograph inside.

“Oh, no, Tim, I couldn’t,” said Dick, catching on.

“I’ll get another one printed,” said Tim, handing him the envelope. “This was a cheap rush job, anyway. I was thinking I’d get a nicer one done at some point.”

“Oh, sure, so you give me the dud,” Dick chuckled, he took it anyway. His fingers slid over the paper a few times. “Nice envelope.”

“It came from Bruce’s study,” Tim said. Dick nodded.

“Thanks, Tim,” he said, but before he could go on, his phone chimed. He pulled it out to check it, but it chimed again— a lot.

“Everything okay?” Tim asked, when Dick frowned down at the screen.

“Yeah, sorry,” Dick replied, sticking his phone back into his pocket. “Just my friend, Roy. He’s having some kind of a crisis. He’s... kind of a drama queen.”

Tim couldn’t help but notice the way that Dick had angled himself towards the door. “Do you need to go?” he asked, offering an out.

Dick appeared—*appeared*—to think about it, then grimaced like he regretted what he was about to say. “Yeah, actually, I’d better. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all good,” Tim reassured him. “We were done anyway.”

“This really was fun,” said Dick, stepping out into the hall. Tim followed but hesitated, assuming Dick would head for the front door to leave, but instead he turned back towards the kitchen and the stairs. “I can’t wait to brag about all this to Donna later. She’s gonna be *so* impressed.”

Tim made an indistinct sound of agreement, wondering if Dick would be reporting to anyone else about this afternoon.

“What are you gonna do the rest of the day?” Dick went on.

Tim shrugged. “Work on the security system, I guess. That’s what Bruce wants me to do.”

Dick shook his head. “That whole thing is still so wild to me. But uh, have fun?”

Tim huffed a laugh. “Thanks.”

They’d reached the bottom of the stairs. They both glanced up, but Tim gestured over his shoulder.

“My laptop’s in the dining room, so...”

“Right,” said Dick. “I’m just gonna grab some things then head out. Can you tell Alfred I won’t be home for dinner?”

“Sure,” said Tim, and then, to his surprise, Dick gave him a quick hug before starting up the stairs.

“You’re the best, Timmy,” he called over his shoulder. “See you around.”

“Okay,” Tim said, too thrown by the hug to realize that Dick was already halfway up the stairs and probably couldn’t hear him. He watched Dick reach the top landing and turn left out of sight, then he headed to the dining room.

He puttered away at the security system code for about an hour, until he heard the front door open, and footsteps on the stairs. Thinking that he was hearing Dick return, he thought, *That didn’t take long.*

Then he realized that he hadn’t heard Dick leave. Or, he had just been so engrossed in what he was doing that he didn’t hear. That kind of thing didn’t usually happen to Tim, though.

Still, he was curious to know why Dick was back so soon, so he left his laptop where it was and went out into the main hall. There, he found Bruce coming down the stairs, wearing a dressed-down version of what he’d worn to the office that morning. He still had a collared shirt and nice slacks, but he was in his sock feet, and the jacket and tie were gone.

“Hey, Tim,” he said as he reached the bottom of the stairs. “Are you the only one home?”

“Alfred’s around here somewhere,” said Tim, frowning. “But Dick got a text and had to go. His friend needed help with something.”

A familiar crease appeared between Bruce’s eyebrows. “Which friend?”

“Uh, Ron? I think,” Tim guessed.

The crease deepened. “You mean Roy?”

“Yeah, that was it,” Tim said. He’d been pretty distracted when Dick had said the name earlier. Just as he was distracted now, still thinking about how Dick had either left the manor an hour ago without making a sound, or else Tim was way less alert than he often gave himself credit for.

“Something wrong?” Bruce asked.

Tim made a conscious effort to smooth out his expression. “No,” he said. “Just, uh, kinda hungry, actually.”

Bruce smiled. “Me too. Think we can raid the junk food stash before Alfred catches us?”

“There’s a junk food stash?” Tim asked, intrigued.

Bruce ruffled his hair as he went by, leading the way to the kitchen. “This old house has a surprising number of hiding places.”

Tim stared after him. “Right,” he said, and followed.

They’d barely opened the pretzels when Alfred appeared as if from nowhere and fixed them with a disapproving frown. Tim pulled his hand out of the bag immediately, but Bruce kept munching.

“I see I’ll have to move those again,” Alfred said.

“You know I’ll just find them again,” Bruce countered.

Cautiously, Tim reached into the bag and pulled out two more pretzels. Alfred *tsk*ed.

“At least pair them with something,” he said, going to the pantry.

“Soda?” Bruce suggested, giving Tim an honest-to-goodness wink. (Tim wondered why he was in such a good mood but decided not to question it, just in case.)

Alfred set a jar of peanut butter on the counter between them. “Protein,” he announced.

“Oh, good call, Al,” said Bruce. He reached for the jar and twisted off the lid.

Alfred shook his head but carried on through the kitchen to get to the fridge. Tim followed Bruce’s lead and dipped a pretzel directly into the peanut butter. It was really good.

“Well, since you’ve spoiled your appetites, I suppose I’ll have to rely on Master Dick’s input to decide what to have for supper.” Alfred sighed. “I only hope he’s not in the mood for cold cereal.”

“Mmph,” said Tim, unsticking enough of the peanut butter from his throat that he could speak. “Dick told me to tell you he wouldn’t be

back in time for dinner."

"Oh?" Alfred spun to face him— no, to face *Bruce,* who looked to Tim a second later.

"Did he say why?" Bruce asked.

Tim thought for second. Dick hadn't, but Tim could guess it was a Nightwing thing. He obviously couldn't say that, though, so instead he shrugged and told the truth.

"No. He just said that his friend Roy was having some kind of emergency, and he had to go."

"I see," said Alfred.

He exchanged another glance with Bruce, quick as lightning, and Bruce maybe nodded, but Tim couldn't be sure; the gesture was *tiny.* A second later, Bruce pushed his stool back from the kitchen island and got to his feet.

"I'll be right back," he said simply and left the room.

Tim turned, wanting to watch him leave, because something had changed—*Bruce* had changed—in the last few seconds, and he was curious. But Alfred drew his attention again.

"Can I offer you something to drink, Master Tim?" he asked. "Perhaps some chocolate milk?"

"Uh, sure," said Tim, when what he really wanted to do was follow Bruce.

Alfred turned his back to pour the milk, and Tim took his chance. "My phone's still in the dining room," he said, and he left the kitchen as quickly as he dared.

He made it to the main hall in time to see Bruce disappear at the top of the stairs. He turned left at the landing— the same way Dick had earlier, Tim realized. In the same moment, he also realized what else had been bothering him so much about not seeing or hearing Dick leave earlier: Dick had said he was going upstairs to grab a few things, but he'd turned *left.* The bedrooms were to the *right* at the top of the stairs; to the left was Bruce's study, along with a few other rooms that Tim vaguely remembered from Alfred's tour on his first night at Wayne Manor.

Could Dick have gone somewhere else before heading to his bedroom? It was possible, Tim supposed, remembering how Dick had come out of Bruce's study the other night. But none of this solved the problem of how Dick got down the rather-creaky main stairs and out the front door without Tim hearing a sound.

...unless he didn't.

Could there be another way out of the manor? Tim knew there was at least one other set of stairs, narrower and more rarely used. They led almost directly from the side door to the hall outside Bruce's study. Dick could have gone out that way; that would explain why Tim didn't hear him. But his gut told him that that wasn't it, that he was missing something. Something big, something obvious.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket to make it seem like he'd just retrieved it, and walked back into the kitchen. There was a glass of chocolate milk at his place on the kitchen island—very light brown, Alfred had obviously cut it with regular—along with a handful of pretzels and a scoop of peanut butter on a small plate. The bag and the jar had been put away.

Tim settled onto the stool and picked up a pretzel while Alfred said something about Bruce passing along bad habits to Tim. Tim made vague sounds of agreement while he finished his snack, keeping one eye on the door to watch for Bruce's return. His phone chirped before he did, however, and when Tim looked down to see the notification, he forgot about Bruce almost entirely.

It was a news alert. He'd set them up a while ago, for various keywords, and they were rarely interesting. This was one of the rare ones.

Breaking: One-Fifth of Fearsome Five Attacks San Francisco, Titans on Scene

Tim double-checked that Alfred wasn't paying attention before he tapped on the headline. The article was based in unconfirmed reports, but it seemed that Gizmo (a villain that Tim wasn't familiar with at all) had somehow sabotaged a trolley full of commuters so that it sprouted a dozen mechanical legs and climbed up the side of the Transamerica Pyramid. Then he'd flown up next to it with his jetpack (because apparently Gizmo used a jetpack) and shouted his demands: he wanted seven million dollars and a chartered plane to fly him anywhere he wanted to go.

At the end of the brief write-up, there were a few videos that had gone viral on social media. Tim turned the volume all the way down on his phone, glanced over his shoulder to make sure Bruce wasn't on his way back, and pressed play on the first one.

It captured the moments right after the trolley left its tracks, and Tim had to admit it made his skin crawl. Like a giant centipede, the trolley scurried across the street, stopping car traffic and causing pedestrians to scramble, including the person who was shooting the film, who ran. Their phone swung wildly in their hand for a few seconds before they turned the camera off.

The second video showed two of the Titans—Wonder Girl and Arsenal—rushing through the crowd. Arsenal fired several arrows up, and Wonder Girl flung out her lasso, which glowed silver and hooked itself around one of the trolley's legs. She let herself be pulled to the roof of the trolley as it climbed higher and higher, then the video cut as a firefighter came into frame, waving his hands so the people would move back.

The third and final video was shot from higher up— an apartment building across the street, if Tim had to guess. Through the dirty glass and beyond a narrow balcony, Tim could see the trolley making its way up the Transamerica Pyramid, Wonder Girl still clinging to its back. A speck shot up beside the trolley and hovered in the air. The person filming zoomed in, and Tim saw that the speck was actually a short bald man with goggles over his eyes and a megaphone in his hand.

Then the shot went black. Tim assumed it was over, but a second later the camera zoomed out again, and Tim realized what had happened. Something—*someone*—had moved in front of the window, and because the camera had been so zoomed in, their body had covered all of its view. The person filming recovered quickly enough to zoom out and pull the camera up, and Tim couldn't help but gasp.

"What is it?" asked Alfred from the other side of the kitchen.

"Nothing," said Tim quickly, pausing the video on Nightwing's cheeky grin. "Just, uh, something Pat said."

"Ah," said Alfred.

Tim hit play again, watching Nightwing—watching *Dick*—hop over the balcony railing and leap. Tim's heart stuttered, but a second later a grapple line went up, and Tim caught sight of Nightwing swinging

through the air like he had in the fitness room just a few days ago, like there was only ten feet between him and ground and not ten storeys.

San Francisco, Tim thought numbly, pausing the video as it cut to an ad for acne products. He checked the timestamp on the original social media post and saw that it had been shared 37 minutes ago. A quick check of the clock told him he'd last seen Dick going upstairs about 66 minutes ago.

It was impossible. Not even the Batjet could have gotten him to the West Coast in less than half an hour. Tim wondered if he'd been too quick to dismiss the possibility of the Bats having the ability to teleport.

Or the technology to do so, he amended silently, closing the post and setting his phone face-down on the counter as Bruce re-entered the kitchen. Nightwing's sudden disappearance and reappearance on the other side of the country certainly implied that the machine that let them do so was hidden somewhere in the manor. That, combined with the mysterious secondary security system that Bruce had mentioned once and then never brought up again, made Tim think more than ever that Batman's base of operations was either hidden inside or accessible from Wayne Manor.

It made sense. As much as Bruce didn't want Batman associated with himself or his company, he was also kind of paranoid. There was probably no way he'd risk his base—Batbase?—being discovered or destroyed accidentally. If it was inside his own house, at least Bruce could keep an eye on it at all times.

And, speaking of keeping an eye on things, Tim glanced around the kitchen while Bruce and Alfred started talking about the grocery list. He knew there had to be cameras hidden around the manor, but he hadn't spotted any yet. He'd searched his bedroom especially thoroughly—several times now—and found none. But, like Bruce said, the manor was full of hiding places.

If I were a Batbase, Tim wondered, *where would I be?*

Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Batman and Nightwing work their respective cases.

“Hey,” Dick said brightly. “I tried the comms, but you’re offline. Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” said Bruce. “Came back early, that’s all.”

“Keeping an eye on your feral cat?”

Bruce huffed, fighting back a smile. “Something like that.”

Chapter Notes

Hello!

Just a heads-up that, after the next chapter (36), I will be going on hiatus, probably for 6-12 weeks. I expect to return in early summer, definitely no later than Tim's birthday (July 19).

Thank you for your patience and your support! Your kudos & comments have honestly meant the world to me. We are now entering the final act of the story, and I'm so excited to see it through!

Love,
MrsD

A few days had passed since Dick’s departure, and Bruce still wasn’t used to how quiet the manor could get without him. Granted, it was the middle of the night, but still.

He was working upstairs. He didn’t usually, but lately he’d been making an exception given Tim’s... well. Given Tim. Bruce had installed extra sensors in the bedroom hallway—on a different system, well out of Tim’s reach—but if Tim was having nightmares again, and if they were bad enough that he was willing to re-code the manor’s security system in the middle of the night and take off, Bruce figured it was good to stay close. The last few nights, he’d kept patrols short and come home early.

He was seated at the rarely-used writing desk that was tucked into one

corner of the master bedroom. When this room belonged to his parents, Bruce's mother had had a dressing table in this corner, complete with an ornate mirror and cushioned stool. When he took over the room, Bruce made Alfred put it all in storage; he found he could picture his mother sitting there a little too clearly, curling her hair with her makeup brushes at her elbow and her jewellery box open and sparkling before her. He had a memory—so faint he wondered if he'd imagined it—of sitting on her knee and helping her choose which pieces to wear. He'd never had the heart to ask Alfred if this had ever actually happened or not, and to this day he wasn't sure where his mother's jewellery had ended up. Someday, maybe if he had a daughter, he'd ask Alfred to track it and her dressing table down.

Bruce sighed, frustrated that his mind was wandering again. He suppressed a yawn and went back to the myriad of case notes spread out before him.

Over the last few weeks, he'd acquired new evidence in the LexCorp Four case. The most standout piece, by far, was the voicemail that Dr. Marcus received from Dr. Rota, the fourth victim, on the night she disappeared. Not only did it narrow down the window of opportunity significantly, but it also hinted at a possible motive: the 'generator' that AJ had mentioned to Bruce in passing the night he came to the manor.

Gordon's detectives, with Batman listening in, had questioned AJ about this at length, and Bruce had been able to do a bit of research into AJ's files to find out more. The generator was an idea for a device that AJ and Rota had come up with while they were students working with a humanitarian relief organization abroad. It was a theoretical machine that could replicate a small supply of almost any substance—essentially a 3-D printer for medicine. With it, they theorized, small clinics in rural or impoverished communities could lower their supply costs without having to compromise care. Drug components, after all, have a longer shelf life on their own; doctors and clinics wouldn't have to worry as much about expired products or rushing in life-saving medicine in case of an emergency. The generator could produce enough of the needed medication to get them through the first crucial hours or days of an outbreak before help could arrive.

AJ had described it as a pipe dream. It was fairly obvious why: the technology to build such a device was impossible, let alone the logistics of implementing a machine like this where it would be most needed. According to AJ, both he and Rota were well aware of the fact that the generator would never actually come to be. But they still

liked to talk about it. Every time they saw each other, one of them would propose a new method to make the generator a reality. It was a fun game… or so AJ thought.

The voicemail that AJ received out of the blue at 3 in the morning implied that the generator was *very* real to Rota and her employers.

"LexCorp *knows,"* she'd said, between frankly heart-wrenching sobs. "They know what this thing can do, and they want it."

She also seemed to know that LexCorp had had her lab team killed, and that she was the next target, though she hadn't explained how.

"They're lying," she'd told AJ, referring to LexCorp. She was crying so hard she coughed with it. "Don't trust them. My team's dead, *I'm* dead, and they know. They're covering it up."

Most frustratingly, she also implicated the Falcone crime syndicate, but said little other than the name. She seemed to get interrupted, swearing mid-sentence, then told AJ that she'd always loved him before the call ended.

Bruce had listened to the message almost a dozen times now, and it was no less affecting.

The existence of the generator, in Bruce's opinion, explained LexCorp's attempt to recruit AJ after Rota's death. It could also explain the break-ins at AJ's home and the WE lab: someone at LexCorp—Bruce suspected Sebastian Cronin, Rota's replacement—may have paid the Falcones to try and get their hands on what AJ knew about the generator in an attempt to finish Rota's work.

Still, as a motive for murder, the generator didn't quite fit. If Luthor wanted the generator—something that only Rota and possibly AJ could build—why would he have Rota killed? As Dick had pointed out when Bruce briefed him on the case, it made sense for LexCorp to target those around Rota, especially if someone was looking to intimidate her into telling them more about the generator, but why kill Rota herself? With her dead, Luthor and his corporation got nothing.

Bruce didn't have an answer. He left the question simmering on a back burner.

To date, Rota's phone had not been found. The GCPD was attempting to acquire Rota's phone records to see if she'd called anyone else that

night, but given that the coroner had already declared her death accidental, it was an uphill battle until they could order a review of the case— and with the body cremated, that would be a challenge, too. Likewise, Gordon had coordinated with Metropolis PD to try and subpoena LexCorp's HR files on Rota's team, but Luthor's lawyers had swarmed on the request like ants on a dropped ice cream cone. Bruce was giving the police a little more time to do it legally, but it was looking more and more likely that he'd have to get involved— or, more accurately, get Barbara Gordon involved.

In the meantime, he'd been combing through the GCPD's interviews with witnesses and next of kin. Given what Ash, the bartender at the Loose Seal Saloon, had told him about the first victim appearing to be followed on the night they disappeared, he wondered if anyone else had reported anything similar.

The answer was yes. In interviews early in the case, Rota's sister, as well as the ex-wife of the third victim, Anthony Siemens, claimed they were acting paranoid in the days leading up to their deaths and reported being followed. Unfortunately, since the officers conducting these interviews didn't know this detail was important, they didn't dwell on it as much as Bruce would have liked. Now, he mourned the lost opportunity to draw out more information while their memories were fresh. Gordon had requested to re-interview both parties, but, again, with the cases technically closed, any conversations would be voluntary, and Bruce couldn't blame Rota's sister or Siemens' ex-wife if they didn't want to go over something so painful again.

The last lead he was following up on was the one he'd been chasing since the day he spotted Gabriel Lavaste in a Metropolis park in broad daylight: the Falcones. He'd already eliminated Lavaste himself from involvement in the scientists' deaths, but Carmine had dozens of fixers just like him, not to mention the possibility of an external hire. Bruce had run down the list of every professional killer he knew of who worked in Metropolis and Gotham City, plus a few more that he knew liked to travel. Those who fit the profile of one or more of the LexCorp Four went on a new list, and he'd been painstakingly investigating each and every one to try and establish their whereabouts on the nights in question.

There was also the possibility that Luthor or the Falcones had hired a big-name player to take care of their dirty laundry, so Bruce was looking into those as well, one by one. The League of Assassins was unlikely—they didn't tend to get involved in petty corporate matters—but Bruce had done a little digging anyway, taking care to leave

enough digital footprints that he was expecting a phone call or visit from Talia any day now. Deathstroke was slightly more likely. If nothing else, Luthor could afford to pay his fee, and when it came to Slade Wilson, money was a primary motivator. Bruce considered Deadshot, too, but only one of the victims had been killed with a bullet, and the gun in question had been a simple 9mm handgun. Floyd Lawton would never deign to use such a pedestrian weapon.

While he shuffled some papers, Bruce's phone lit up with a silent call. He reached for it and got to his feet as he answered.

"Hi, Dick," he said, keeping his voice low even though the bedroom door was closed.

"Hey," Dick replied brightly. "I tried the comms, but you're offline. Everything okay?"

"Yeah," said Bruce. "Came back early, that's all."

"Keeping an eye on your feral cat?"

Bruce huffed, fighting back a smile. "Something like that."

"Cool. So, you still working, or...?"

"Working. What's up?"

"Well, I talked to our friends in Blüdhaven last night and sent some files to the computer downstairs. Happy to go through them with you if you've got a sec."

Bruce glanced at the clock. It was a little after three— surely Tim was asleep by now, right? "Sounds good," he decided. "Let me call you back in a minute, once I have it in front of me."

"'Kay," said Dick, and he disconnected.

Bruce slipped his phone into his pocket and tidied up his physical files, tucking them into a drawer that locked. Then he closed his laptop and turned out the bedroom light. He gave his eyes a second to adjust, and silently opened the bedroom door.

He moved like a ghost down the hall. There was no light on in Tim's room, which was immediately a good sign, but he still stopped for a moment and listened. When all he heard was breathing, he pulled his penlight out of his other pocket and flicked it on, keeping the beam

directed away so it didn't wake Tim. When the diffused light revealed no pillow at the base of the door, Bruce breathed a sigh of relief and turned it off, carrying on.

At the top of the stairs he pivoted, heading down the west hall to get to his study. When he got there, he took an extra moment to look for anything that seemed out of place, as he always did. Satisfied that everything was in order, he locked the door and went to the clock. He set the hands and pulled the secret passage open when the mechanism clicked. The lights came on when he set foot on the top step, and the clock swung closed behind him.

When he reached the Batcomputer, he logged in and accepted Dick's file transfer request. The download started, and Bruce called Dick back, putting him on speaker.

"You get it?" Dick asked when he picked up.

"Got it," Bruce affirmed, opening the trio of spreadsheets that Dick had just sent. "What am I looking at?"

"Donor records," Dick answered promptly. "We've got the Blüdhaven General Hospital Foundation, the BPD Children's Charity, and Shady Pines Funeral Home. All the records go back about three years."

"I see that," said Bruce, scrolling. The BGHF's document was by far the largest, with thousands of rows and columns that included names of individual donors and firms, addresses, phone numbers, and even dollar amounts in some cases. "And why am I looking at this?"

"Because a very helpful and not unattractive diener at the Blüdhaven County Coroner's Office told me this is how it worked. Make a big enough donation to one or all three of these, and people look the other way."

"Hm," said Bruce, already strategizing. He'd start by cross-referencing the lists with known LexCorp subsidiaries and companies that he knew to be fronts for Falcone. If that turned up nothing, then he'd create a search algorithm that would find entries that appeared in all three documents to give him a starting point for suspicious donations.

"Ooh, check out row 6,082 on the BGHF record," said Dick, sudden and sharp. "Huge red flags from that one."

"One second." Bruce navigated to that document and found the row in question.

Wayne Enterprises.

“Very funny,” Bruce said.

Dick cackled. “I know.”

“How did you get these?” Bruce asked.

“Babs,” Dick said simply. “And I know, it’s a long shot, but—”

“But whoever’s covering for LexCorp might be on one of these lists.”

“Exactly. Do you think I should ask her out?”

Bruce blinked and looked away from the screen. “Who, Barbara?”

“No, the diener. She was cute. Seemed pretty into me, but it could just be a mask thing. Hard to tell sometimes.”

“Is that why she confided in you?” Bruce asked with a frown. “Did you promise her—”

“No, nothing like that,” Dick cut him off, laughing again. “She confided in me because she’s been a diener for more than five years and her salary hasn’t changed. The Coroner won’t write her a letter of recommendation to go anywhere else, either. She said he’s a corrupt, incompetent prick, and she hopes I get to kick his ass.” He paused. “I think I’m in love.”

Bruce rolled his eyes. “It’s probably just a mask thing.”

“Yeah, probably,” Dick sighed, wistful. “Still.”

He didn’t say anything more, and Bruce became hyper-aware of the silence that fell. He could feel it growing between them, and the awkwardness with it.

He knew that he should say something else. He even *wanted* to. He’d really enjoyed spending time with Dick when he’d been at the manor. He’d missed Dick’s company— his kindness to Tim, his quick wit, even his terrible puns. But Bruce didn’t know how to keep it going. Not when the conversation mattered. *Brucie* could make conversation all day, about even the most inane topics known to man, but Bruce? Not so much.

Actually, thinking of Brucie gave him an idea. Unfortunately, he and Dick spoke at the same time.

“So, the Garden Party—” Bruce started.

“So, I was wondering—” Dick said.

There was another awkward beat of silence. Dick said, “Sorry, go ahead.”

Bruce hesitated, thinking he should protest, then spoke in a rush. “The company Garden Party is coming up in a few weeks,” he said. “Do you think you’d like to attend?”

“Oh,” said Dick, surprised. Bruce couldn’t blame him; the question had nothing to do with anything they’d been talking about a moment ago. Plus, with one exception, Dick hadn’t attended any high-society events since he turned fifteen.

“Uh, I don’t know, Bruce,” Dick said. “Those events... they aren’t really my thing, you know? No offence,” he added quickly.

“I know,” Bruce told him. “It’s just... with Tim, I thought—”

“Oh, Tim’s going?”

“Well,” Bruce faltered. “I don’t— I mean, I thought—”

“You didn’t actually ask him if he wanted to be there or not,” Dick concluded. The smile was all but gone from his voice. “You just assumed he would.”

Bruce kicked himself for bringing this up. “I haven’t asked him *yet.* I thought I’d talk to you first and see if you wanted to go. If you do, then I thought maybe you’d be a... selling point for Tim,” he said, aiming for the friendly tone of the banter they’d shared just a few minutes ago.

It went over like a lead balloon. “Don’t do that,” said Dick— through his teeth, it seemed. “Don’t use him to guilt-trip me into doing what you want me to do.”

“That wasn’t what I meant,” Bruce said, his temperature rising. “And I’m not trying to convince you to come. I’m *asking* if you’d like to be there.”

“Then the answer is no,” said Dick clearly. “I don’t.”

“Okay, then,” said Bruce, clipped. “You don’t have to.”

“Good!”

“Good.”

More silence. After a moment, Bruce unclenched his jaw. “Look, Dick —” he started.

“I gotta go,” Dick interrupted.

“Okay. Goodnight,” said Bruce, but Dick had already hung up.

Bruce pushed his phone across the desk and put his head in his hands. “Dammit,” he said to the empty Cave.

Dick tossed his phone down on the couch, torn between wishing he’d hung up sooner and wishing he’d stayed on the line to try and make things right. He began to pace around the rug on the floor of his safehouse like it was the world’s tiniest, ugliest racetrack.

Probably shouldn’t have snapped, he thought, but the anger surged up his throat again a second later.

He shouldn’t have—? No. *Bruce* shouldn’t have.

He shouldn’t have asked. He should have known better. He knew how much Dick hated those stupid corporate events— Dick had hated them since the day he came to Wayne Manor, and it took him until he was almost fifteen to finally build up enough courage to say so.

Had Bruce lost his mind? Or his memory? Dick changed direction, pacing counter-clockwise for a dozen more loops. Did he *really* not remember what happened the last time he roped Dick into attending one of his parties?

For Jason’s sake, he’d said. *To be a friendly face.*

Bullshit. The gala had been a glorified babysitting gig, with Dick having to constantly run interference for a smart-mouthed kid who liked to fight and had a lot of good reasons to hate Gotham’s upper crust.

Obviously, that wasn’t how Bruce remembered it. Obviously, Bruce had gotten it into his head that he should try Family-Friendly Brucie again now that he had a new kid.

Just swap them out, Bruce, Dick thought bitterly, coming to a stop and

glaring out the window at the Gotham City skyline. Jason for Dick, Tim for Jason. Just another dark-haired blue-eyed kid, carrying on the family business, right? He hadn't even *asked* Tim if he wanted to go! Did he really have *no* idea—?

Dick started pacing again, but it wasn't enough. He needed to *move.*

He strode to the kitchenette and pressed his palm against the wall. The hidden panel opened, and he grabbed his gear— it was an older suit, but it would do, and he'd brought his favourite escrima with him when he made the trip from Blüdhaven this afternoon to see Babs. He wished he'd gone back home before calling Bruce—with the mood he was in, he'd much rather be on his own turf—but with Batman already in for the night, at least he knew their paths wouldn't cross.

The second he climbed out the window to the fire escape, he started to feel better. He grappled up to the roof of the apartment building, then took a second to choose his next target. He was in the Cauldron district, so he had plenty of options if he wanted to fly. He chose the Beltline Building. Seventeen storeys, a gargoyle on each corner— it was perfect.

His thoughts—his anger—went out of focus as he lost himself in the physicality of swinging from one building to the next. There was only the leap, the freefall, the rush of wind in his hair— and sirens. He rolled to a stop on top of the *Gotham Herald* building and tracked the red and blue lights.

An ambulance, already well on its way to Elliot Memorial. He kept going.

Though he'd set out with no destination in mind, when he found himself heading east, he decided to keep going all the way to Kingston. The mostly-residential district was a graveyard at this time of night, so he likely didn't have to worry about being seen even though the buildings were lower and more spaced apart.

He started heading to 144th and Bartholomew, but realized on 143rd that the neighbourhood looked familiar. He paused on a parapet to look down and, sure enough, there was the new arcade that Tim had told him about, where Rosie's Diner used to be.

Weird coincidence, he thought, as he carried on a moment later. Dr. AJ Marcus lived right around the corner.

The house, he realized as he approached from the east, looked nothing

like the photos Bug had sent the GCPD. Nightwing descended to the sidewalk and crossed the deserted street to enter the dark, silent park. It only took a moment before he understood why the building looked different. He spun around, looking for a higher vantage point.

There. A four-storey apartment building almost directly across from Dr. Marcus' front door. He grappled up, and, just to be sure, he pulled up one of Bug's images on his gauntlet. The holographic projector lined up perfectly, like an AR overlay that placed black-and-white burglars on either side of Dr. Marcus' door.

Nightwing smiled. They were here. Bug had been standing *right here* when they photographed the break-in. Was it luck, Nightwing wondered, that they were on this rooftop when the crime occurred? Or did they have some inside connection that let them know when things were about to go down?

Nightwing swiped away the photo and tapped the side of his mask, bringing up the telescopic lenses. The display told him there were nearly 300 metres between the edge of the roof and Dr. Marcus' house — the park wasn't at its widest point here, but it wasn't tiny, either. Bug must have had some good glass, as Donna would put it, to get those shots from that distance.

He thought back to working with Tim in the darkroom on Saturday, how he'd used the focus finder to choose which part of the image would get the most detail. That, more than anything, had confirmed to Nightwing that Bug made their own prints. He also thought about what Tim had told him about the process of burning and dodging—adding more or less light to certain places on a print. It was likely that Bug had done this, though Nightwing didn't trust himself to spot the signs of it in the finished product. Not for the first time, he wished he could just show Bug's photos to Tim.

With another touch to his mask, Nightwing activated his night-vision. Bug's trail was very cold—he was more than three weeks late at this point—but he scanned the rooftop regardless. As expected, nothing stood out. He could scan for fingerprints or touch DNA, but three weeks and at least two days of rain meant there was likely nothing to find. This rooftop was, for the moment, a dead end.

But he wasn't the only detective to have visited this crime scene, Nightwing reminded himself. Maybe Batman had noticed something that didn't seem important at the time, some clue that Nightwing could now use to piece together Bug's movements.

Unfortunately, Nightwing had *no* interest in talking to Batman right now.

He sighed and deactivated his night-vision, turning away from the view of the townhouses. He lowered himself to sit with his back against the lip of the roof. The sky overhead was cloudy, the air warm and humid, with the trace of a storm likely to come later in the morning. But for now the rain was holding off, and everything else was quiet— nothing to distract him.

He could call Bruce anyway, he thought. Hold out the case like an olive branch. It might work, and it'd be a hell of a lot less awkward than trying to give or accept an apology. But he didn't want to answer a lot of questions about what he was digging into, and if Bruce—if *Batman*—wanted answers that Dick wouldn't give him, it was sure to just start another fight.

Still. Dick hit the redial.

Bruce picked up after only one ring, but his voice was cautious. "Hello?"

"Hey, it's me again," Dick said, keeping his voice down.

"Hi." Bruce paused, clearly waiting for an explanation. When he didn't get one, he asked, "What's up?"

Dick still didn't speak for a moment. He could hear nothing over the line— no typing, clicking, or rustling. He could picture Bruce sitting perfectly still at the Batcomputer, waiting like he was made of stone.

Finally, Dick breathed out. "I was just going through police reports from the break-in at Dr. Marcus' place."

A beat of silence. Then an uncertain, "Oh?"

"Yeah." Dick cleared his throat. "Trying to get a feel for the scene. When you arrived, did you come from the east side?"

"The west," Bruce corrected him. There was still something cautious—confused?—in his tone. "I scoped it out from a building opposite the house. A three- or four-storey walk-up, I think it was."

Dick nodded and closed his eyes. "Okay, yeah. I see the building on satellite imagery. And that was on Monday, right? The same day the cops started their investigation?"

“That’s correct.”

“Was there anything weird about the scene? Anything you noticed?”

“No.” Dick could practically *feel* Bruce desperately trying to figure him out. “Pretty standard, really. Bullock was leading it.”

Dick nodded again, aware that Bruce wouldn’t see him, and let the silence stretch until Bruce broke it again.

“I mean,” he said, “I found that heart-shaped piece of paper up there on the roof, but...”

Dick’s eyes snapped open. He’d forgotten completely about the folded paper that was on the desk in the Batcave. Bruce had told him he’d found it on patrol near here, but he hadn’t specified when or where.

Dick forced himself to sound nonchalant. He knew that if he seemed too excited, Bruce would become a dog with a bone, and, for whatever reason, Dick didn’t want that to happen with regard to his little Bug investigation. Not yet, anyway.

“Oh, that’s where you found it?”

“Yeah,” Bruce confirmed. “Why?”

“Nothing,” said Dick, making sure Bruce heard the shrug in his tone. “Just a bit weird.”

“Yeah. That was why I brought it home with me.” Bruce paused. Dick held his breath. “Do you still have it?”

“No,” Dick lied. “I forgot to take it out of my jeans pocket and it disintegrated in the wash. Had to throw it out.”

“Hm,” said Bruce, but it wasn’t a thoughtful *hm.* It was an acceptance *hm.* Whether he was accepting Dick’s lie or accepting that Dick was lying to him, Dick wasn’t sure. But he relaxed regardless.

“Anyway,” he said. “That’s why I called.”

Bruce seemed to accept that lie, too. “Thanks. For... working the case. It’s been— you’ve been a huge help. And I appreciate it. A lot.”

“Yeah,” was all Dick managed to say to that. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Bruce echoed softly. “Don’t work too late, chum.”

Dick smiled, though his throat felt tight. “Goodnight.”

“’Night.”

Dick stayed on the roof a little longer, staring at the low-hanging clouds on the horizon, not really thinking about anything— or, not really letting himself think about anything.

Finally, when the night got old enough that the birds began to chirp in the park below, he got to his feet and headed back to the safehouse.

Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Bruce discovers that Tim is even better at taking care of himself than anyone knew. Tim gives Bruce insight on a "cold case". Dick makes a discovery... and a decision.

Dick laughed, loud and sudden, echoing in the empty room. There was just something absurdly funny about the whole thing.

Chapter Notes

Hello!

Just a reminder that I am going on hiatus for the next few months. I hope to return with new chapters in June...ish. Depends on how much capitalism lets me write in the next little while.

I also wanted to apologize for not replying to so many of your lovely comments. Work is kicking my ass right now, and I hate it. Seriously, fuck capitalism. But even if I don't answer, I see all your comments and they mean the world to me, truly. Thank you thank you thank you!

Love,
MrsD.

Tim awoke to a low rumble of thunder. His bedroom was lit by grey daylight that flickered white with lightning. Rain hit the window in a steady patter, but gusts of wind brought a loud, quick spray every few seconds.

Tim exhaled and closed his eyes again, feeling his heart slow down from the sudden wake-up. When he re-opened them a moment later, he glanced at the alarm clock on his nightstand and found that it was early— not even eight yet. Normally, he'd sleep a little longer—and he was tempted—but with school starting next week, he knew he'd have to get used to waking up earlier soon anyway. So he sat up with an effort and swung his legs out from under the covers. Suppressing a yawn, he pulled on some clean clothes and headed across the hall to the bathroom. His eyes kept closing on their own.

By the time he was at the top of the stairs, he was finally starting to

feel a little less zombie-ish. And, thankfully, he could smell coffee. Someone was awake, at least. Tim assumed it was Alfred—Bruce *was* a creature of the night—but to his surprise, he heard two voices as he approached the kitchen. He had no intention of eavesdropping on them, but he stopped in the hall when he heard Bruce say his name.

“Did Tim say why he went in there?”

“To fetch more envelopes, apparently,” Alfred answered.

“For his pictures?”

“Apparently,” Alfred repeated.

A pause. “You think he was lying to you?”

“I gave him plenty of envelopes a few weeks ago. I find it hard to believe he’s gone through them all already.”

Bruce hummed thoughtfully. Out in the hall, Tim swallowed hard. He’d known it was a risk, poking around in Bruce’s study, but he’d spent the last couple of days searching other parts of the manor for signs of the Batbase and had turned up nothing. The study was the most obvious entrance, given what he’d already observed, but every time he got close to it, Alfred seemed to appear as if from nowhere with a convenient request that sent him in the opposite direction. Yesterday, he’d taken advantage of Alfred going to the front door to accept a package, but he hadn’t had as much time as he’d thought he would, and so he was caught in the act.

“I just wondered if your keen eyes had noticed anything,” said Alfred, while Tim was still thinking.

“Nothing seemed out of place to me,” Bruce replied. “And— you say that as if *you* wouldn’t notice a line in the dust from a mile away.”

“Clearly, I am failing in my duties if you think there would be ever enough dust to draw a line in.”

Bruce chuckled. Tim thought that this might be his moment to enter the kitchen, but he hesitated, curious if they would say anything else.

They did, but it had nothing to do with him. Alfred asked Bruce which tux he was planning to wear to some hospital charity ball in Blüdhaven next weekend. Bruce requested *the flashy one,* whatever that meant, and Tim took the opportunity to step into the kitchen.

“Good morning, Tim,” said Bruce with obvious surprise.

“Hey,” Tim replied, pitching his voice like he was still half-asleep.

It must have worked, because Alfred said, “I’ll have your half-decaf ready in a moment, Master Tim.”

“I can do it,” Tim protested as always, but Alfred waved him off as always.

“You’re up early,” Bruce observed, while Alfred bustled around behind them.

Tim looked out the terrace doors. Another fork of lightning split the clouds. A growl of thunder followed a second later. “Storm,” he said simply.

Bruce made a vague sound of agreement. “It’s really coming down out there.”

“Yeah.”

A brief silence followed. Bruce sipped from his mug. Tim took the stool next to him at the kitchen island. Alfred continued to make Tim’s coffee.

“I’m glad you’re up,” Bruce said eventually. “We’ve got a lot to do today.”

Tim frowned in confusion. “We do?”

Bruce nodded. “School starts next week. I’m pretty sure your old uniforms won’t fit anymore.”

“Oh.” Tim hadn’t thought about that at all. He should have.

“And, no offence, but your backpack has seen better days.”

“Shoes,” Alfred murmured, his back to them.

“Also, how are your sneakers?” Bruce asked. “Getting tight?”

“Uh, yeah, kinda,” Tim admitted. “I’ve been thinking I should get some new ones soon, but I figured they could last till winter.”

Bruce sent him a slightly puzzled look, but it quickly dissolved into another smile. “We’ll hit the mall as soon as it opens,” he said.

“Hopefully we’ll beat the back-to-school crowds a little.”

Alfred set a steaming mug of coffee in front of him— it was light brown with milk. Tim ignored it for the moment, hung up on the idea that *Bruce Wayne* would go to a mall like anybody else. Didn’t he have, like, personal tailors come to him? Couldn’t he buy an entire shoe store with one phone call if he wanted to?

“Something the matter, Master Tim?” asked Alfred.

“No. Just falling asleep again,” Tim answered, picking up his coffee. It was still too hot to drink, but the warmth was nice on his hands. “This will help. Thanks.”

“Of course,” said Alfred with a smile. He turned away to start making breakfast.

“There’s something else we have to do today, Tim,” Bruce said a few minutes later, when Tim’s coffee was partly gone and his own mug was empty.

Tim glanced over in surprise, noting Bruce’s hesitant tone. “What?”

Bruce shifted on the stool. “Well, I’ve taken a look at your medical records, and it seems that you’re behind on a couple of your shots.”

Tim’s cheeks went hot. He dropped his eyes to the milky surface of his coffee.

“Also, I didn’t see any dental appointments since last December. Is that right?”

Tim nodded numbly. He knew it’d been a while, but almost nine months? That... probably wasn’t good.

“Okay,” said Bruce. He didn’t sound mad or even all that disappointed, but Tim kept his eyes down anyway. “I went ahead and booked some appointments for you this afternoon with our doctor and dentist. I know it’s not very fun, but—”

“I’m sorry you had to do that.”

Bruce stopped talking. Tim winced. He hadn’t meant to speak; the words had just kind of fallen out of his mouth.

“You— what?” said Bruce. “Why are you sorry?”

“I was trying,” Tim told his coffee. “It’s just a lot to keep up with. And once my parents kicked me off their insurance last year....” He shrugged.

Bruce didn’t speak for a moment. In his peripheral vision, Tim could see Bruce and Alfred’s body language mirror each other— they were clearly having some kind of silent conversation, as they often did. It was probably about how badly Tim was taking care of himself.

“Tim,” Bruce said finally. Tim wished he could sink into the floor. “Are you telling me that you’ve been the one booking these appointments and— and paying for them, while you’ve been in foster care?”

Tim scoffed before he could stop himself. Bruce understood at once.

“No,” he said. “Not just since you’ve been in foster care. How long have you been doing this, Tim?”

Tim shrugged, hoping that would be answer enough.

It wasn’t. “Tim.”

Tim blew out a frustrated breath. “When do you get Hepatitis B?”

“Age 12,” Bruce answered promptly.

“That long then,” said Tim. He dared to glance over and found Bruce staring. “What ones did I miss?” he asked, averting his eyes again.

There was a beat of silence before Bruce answered. “TDaP,” he said. “That’s, uh, Tetanus, Diphtheria, and—”

“Pertussis. I know,” said Tim, relieved. “It’s okay if I don’t get that one till next year.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Tim saw Bruce’s mouth move for a moment before he managed to get words to come out. “Sure,” he said finally. “But you also should’ve received the HPV shot by now.”

“HPV is optional for boys,” Tim replied. *And expensive,* he added silently.

“It’s highly recommended,” Bruce countered. “In the last few years especially, there’s been some promising research that indicates—”

Alfred moved again in Tim’s peripheral vision, and Bruce cut himself

off. A second later, he started over with a new tactic.

“My insurance will cover it,” he said. “Both doses.”

Tim found that hard to believe. Before he could think better of it, he swivelled on the stool and looked Bruce straight in the eye. “They’re given six to twelve months apart,” he said. It was a challenge, a dare.

Bruce didn’t back down. He held Tim’s gaze. “I know.”

Tim broke eye contact first, blinking rapidly as he looked away.

Bruce couldn’t mean that, Tim decided, as he drank more coffee. Bruce was just saying the things he was supposed to say, the things he thought Tim was expecting to hear. Like the *my kids* slip-up at dinner the other night. It was a way of maintaining face while he figured things out— like whether he wanted to be a parent again, or whether or not Tim posed a threat to his operations.

There was no way either of those processes would take six months or longer. And if it did, well, Tim still had the emancipation card in his hand. He could play that any time he wanted to; all he had to do was call the lawyer.

Still, if Bruce was willing to pay for him to go to the dentist and get the vaccinations he needed, he may as well take advantage of it. He would have up to a year to save up for the second HPV dose— if he even needed it. He’d do some more research. Maybe one dose was sufficient for a boy his age.

“Okay,” he said finally, picking up his coffee again.

“Okay,” Bruce repeated, like the matter was settled.

Tim decided to let him think that.

Tim’s arms were *sore.* Two-for-one vaccines made sense from a practical point of view, but he really would have preferred being able to lift at least one of his arms above his head.

“Here, I got it,” said Bruce, reaching easily over Tim to retrieve the bowl of ice cream when Tim tried and failed to take it over the high counter. Bruce passed it to him at a much lower level.

“Thanks,” Tim muttered as he took the bowl, embarrassed.

Bruce gave him a quick smile and paid the cashier, then led the way to an empty table by the front window. Despite the rainy weather, the ice cream parlour was pretty busy, like a lot of back-to-school shoppers had had the same idea Bruce did. There were a lot of young families and groups of teenagers, at least a few of whom did double-takes as Bruce walked by, then whispered to each other behind their hands.

Great, Tim thought. This was probably a taste of what he could expect when Bruce dropped him off at Gotham Academy starting next week. He wondered again how that was going to work, logistically speaking. Maybe Alfred would drive him instead. After all, Bruce really wasn't much of a morning person (for obvious reasons). Maybe Tim could convince them to let him take the bus. Or he could float the idea of walking with Pat from their neighbourhood— if Pat would be okay with that.

"Doing okay, bud?" Bruce asked, interrupting Tim's wandering thoughts.

"Yeah," said Tim, digging into his ice cream. The first bite tasted a little funny after the dentist's weirdly gritty, didn't-really-taste-like-bubble-gum toothpaste, but the second was better. "I'm just tired."

"Too tired to talk?"

Tim shrugged. It was an intentional half-answer. He wasn't too tired to talk about some things, but if Bruce felt like having an in-depth heart-to-heart, or interrogating him again about his nighttime activities, then Tim was *exhausted.*

"Because I have another cold case, if you're up for it," Bruce went on.

"Okay," Tim said at once, sitting up straighter. It'd been a while.

Bruce chuckled and ate a little ice cream before he started. "This isn't a real one," he cautioned. "It's from a TV show I've been watching. I'm not done the season yet, but I have no idea how the detectives are gonna figure it out. I can't stop thinking about it, though."

Tim was intrigued. He doubted Bruce was telling the truth—Batman did *not* have time to watch TV—so where was this story really coming from?

"It's a serial murder case," Bruce said, dropping his voice somewhat, even though Tim didn't think anyone would overhear in the noisy ice

cream shop. “Four people have been killed so far.”

“How?” Tim asked at once.

A smile flickered over Bruce’s face. “Well, see, that’s the thing. They all seem to have died in accidents— a car crash, a fire. One victim fell off the pier, supposedly because they were drunk.” He paused for a bite of ice cream. “Another victim got mugged and shot.”

“That’s not an accident,” said Tim. He regretted it a split-second later, because Bruce suddenly looked very serious.

“I know,” he said quietly. He drew a breath before he continued. “But the point is that it took a little while for the detectives to realize the deaths were connected, and that the victims knew each other.”

“How did they know each other?”

“They worked together for the same company.”

“So it’s their boss, right?” Tim guessed. “Or somebody with a grudge against their business.”

Bruce was nodding. “That’s what the detectives thought, too. But then, in the most recent episode I was watching, somebody else was targeted. Somebody who works for a different company.”

Tim scooped up some ice cream, ready for his next bite. “How did that person die?”

“He didn’t. He got away.”

The forgotten ice cream on Tim’s spoon started to drip. “So, why not just ask that guy who tried to kill him?”

“He... didn’t get a good look,” said Bruce. Tim stuck his spoon in his mouth and frowned around it. “It was kind of a chaotic scene,” Bruce continued. “Anyway, now the detectives are trying to figure out the connection between the four victims and the fifth almost-victim.”

“Did he know them?” Tim asked.

“One of them,” said Bruce. “They went to school together.”

“And now he works for a rival company?”

Bruce considered this and nodded. “Yeah, you could say that.”

“Then it’s obvious,” Tim concluded. “The fifth guy did it.” He ate a mouthful of double chocolate ripple as a reward.

“The—” Bruce blinked. “The fifth guy? The one who got away?”

“Yeah,” said Tim, swallowing. “He killed the others, then faked the attack on himself to get the cops off his trail. They’ve probably got him in witness protection right now, don’t they?”

“They... do, yeah.”

“So, my prediction is that next episode, you’ll find out he has, like, a tragic backstory or something,” said Tim. “Something that really f— uh, messed him up and made him a psycho.”

Bruce’s eyebrows were about to disappear into his hair, and his ice cream was rapidly turning into soup. Tim continued, building the story as he went. (Sue him, this was *fun.)*

“The detectives probably don’t suspect him at all, so the smart thing to do would be to stay off their radar, but he can’t help it. He’s all screwed up in the head. Maybe he’s, like, obsessed with destroying the rival company. Like, their inventions killed his mom or something. Or — oh!” Tim interrupted himself. “Maybe he’s in love with one of the victims, but they rejected him, and he decided to take it out on everybody they worked with.”

“He... did say that he fell in love with the fourth victim when they were at school together,” Bruce admitted.

“There you go, then.” Tim grinned across the table. “That’s probably what it is.”

“Huh.” Bruce stared at him a moment longer, then seemed to remember that he had ice cream in front of him that needed eating.

“Those shows are all the same,” Tim added. “It’s always revenge. Or jealousy. Or love, I guess.”

“Right,” Bruce agreed, but it was distant, like he was thinking heavily about something.

Tim left him to it and focused instead on scraping the last bits of ice cream out of the edges of his bowl. After a long moment, Bruce spoke again.

“I hope this isn’t a weird thing to say, Tim,” he said (which Tim took to mean that it was definitely going to be a weird thing to say), “but you kind of reminded me of Jason, just now.”

Yep, Tim thought, his mouth going dry. *Very weird.* Tim didn’t think he’d ever heard Bruce say that name out loud— not on purpose, anyway.

“He used to... predict what would happen in certain stories,” Bruce continued, looking out the window without really seeming to see anything. “He’d come up with the most outlandish theories, I think sometimes just to see if I would take him seriously.”

Tim stared openly as Bruce talked about his son— as *Batman* talked about *Robin.*

“It always threw him off when I did. But the thing is, though, stories sometimes surprise you. Sometimes you have to think about the weirdest possibilities in order to...”

He cut himself off and took a deep breath, then re-focused on Tim. “I never suspected the fifth guy,” he said.

Oh no, Tim thought. He’d been having fun, but if the case wasn’t from a TV show....

“Real crime’s not like on TV, though,” he said, silently begging Bruce to understand while at the same time hoping he wouldn’t— because if he did, there’d be questions.

But Bruce just smiled. “You mean boring.”

Tim huffed a laugh, remembering their train ride to Metropolis more than a month ago, the first time they ever talked about a cold case. “I guess I do mean boring.”

They fell into a friendly silence while Bruce finished his ice cream. “Ready to head home?” he asked, making to stand.

Tim nodded. Bruce held out his hand for Tim’s empty cup, but Tim got to his feet instead and followed him to the trash can, and then out to the parking lot. It was still raining, but the sky was lighter, and it was clear to the south. By the time they got back to the manor, Tim thought, the sun would probably be out.

He wondered what else Bruce had planned for their day today. He

hoped nothing, because he was kind of worn out from shopping all morning. Also, he was eager to get back to his current project. He'd been trying to acquire records of building permits for renovations to Wayne Manor. He was looking for anything in the last fifteen years or so that sounded like it could be the Batbase. It was a long shot—god knew Gotham City had a thriving underground construction industry —but Tim wanted to do his due diligence.

Thankfully, they'd only been in the car a few minutes when Bruce said, "I've got to do some work when we get home, but we should watch a movie or something together after dinner. How's that sound?"

"Okay," Tim agreed, relieved once again. "Sounds good."

"Good," said Bruce. He sent a quick smile in Tim's direction, but just seconds after his eyes returned to the road, he frowned.

Tim tensed, wondering what else Bruce had to say. Was he going to bring up Tim's snooping in his study and get him in trouble for it? Maybe there was more doctor or dentist talk coming. Or was this the day Bruce finally followed through with asking to see some of Tim's night photography?

It turned out: none of the above. When Bruce opened his mouth, he asked Tim to choose some music. Tim agreed maybe a little too quickly, but Bruce didn't seem to mind— not even when Tim turned the volume up. After a few songs, Tim started to relax, his sore arms hurting less as his shoulders lost some of their tension. Whatever was making Bruce frown, it didn't seem to have anything to do with him.

It was probably the crime 'from TV,' Tim realized a few songs later, but he stayed silent. If that was it, then it was best to just let Batman think.

Dick yawned behind the wheel the whole way back to Blüdhaven. He had slept at the safehouse, and it was mid-afternoon now, but the gloomy weather meant that he just wanted to keep sleeping. The rain, like Dick and everyone else apparently, was heading north out of Gotham. His wipers ran constantly, clearing his view of the bumper-to-bumper traffic on the highway.

By the time Dick got back to his apartment, he wanted nothing more than to crash in his own bed... but there was something he had to do first.

The heart-shaped paper was in the duffle bag he'd taken to the manor last week and hadn't yet bothered to unpack. He pulled the note out of an inner pouch and turned it over in his hands, noting the smudges of grime across its outer layer. Then he slipped his pinky finger into one of the folds and tugged gently to loosen it. His heart quickened as he caught sight of messy printing on the inside, but as he worked to unfold the note, he reminded himself it could be nothing. This paper could be completely unrelated to Bug— just an ordinary coincidence.

And then he read it.

Dear Tim,

Hi! I really hope you listened to me, and you didn't read this till you got home. (Because if you didn't I'm totally gonna die of embarassement because I'm standing right in front of you and aaaahhhh never mind I'm just gonna pretend that your reading this at home later.)

Because I have to say something, ok? Ready? Go!

I like you, Tim. I like like you, Tim. A lot. And the whole reason I wanted to go to the arcade with you today was like... maybe..... a date.....???? (Aaaahhhh)

And I wrote you a note because I know I'm gonna loose my courage in front of you and not say that and not ask what I wanted to ask you. So! yeah. I'm asking it here:

Do you want to go on a date? A real date? (With me obvously!!!)

Call me when you read this! Or I'll talk to you at swim class. Or maybe I'll talk to you in a second if your standing here reading it right now? (Please don't be reading it right now!)

Ok bye,
Pat

Dick needed to sit down. So badly, in fact, that by the time he thought it, his body was already moving. The mattress creaked, and his duffle bag, still open, fell towards him. A pair of dirty balled-up socks rolled out and landed on the floor between his feet.

Dick didn't see them. Instead, he saw Tim, using the focus finder on one of his negatives. He saw Tim pulling on a pair of gloves, shoving safety glasses up his nose before mixing the chemical solutions. He saw Tim setting the timer for each step in the development process,

hanging his prints on the line to dry, taking an envelope from a drawer and sliding a photograph inside.

Dick shot back to his feet, once again moving before he'd made a conscious decision to do so. The envelope with Tim's photo of the Gotham waterfront was on top of the fridge. Dick knew he was right the second his fingers made contact with that buttery soft paper. Maybe a small part of him had known it already.

Still, he went to the back corner of his walk-in closet and opened the locked cabinet door. Gordon's evidence bag rustled in his hands. Dick reached inside, knowing that the envelopes and photos had already been checked twice, and there were no fingerprints. Bug was one of the smartest kids that Dick had ever met, and he'd been doing this for a while now.

Dick pulled out all three of the envelopes that the GCPD had received, laying them one after another on his desk. The fourth followed, and he didn't need a scientific analysis of the paper to know that they were identical.

Then he laughed, loud and sudden, echoing in the empty room. There was just something absurdly funny about Tim giving Bruce's own envelopes back to him. Come to think of it, there was also something funny about Bug developing these prints in Batman's own house.

How did Bruce miss this? Dick wondered, before remembering that Bruce didn't take possession of the first set of photos; Gordon had held onto them. And Bruce didn't even know about the second and third set. If he had—if he'd gotten his hands on them—there was no way he wouldn't have figured the whole thing out in minutes.

But then again, Bruce had blind spots. Every detective—every person—did. And as far as suspects went, a 15-year-old kid did seem like an unlikely candidate. Dick wasn't sure he would believe it if he didn't have hard proof right in front of him, not to mention a boatload of circumstantial evidence to go along with it.

First, Tim had been in Kingston on the day of the break-in at Dr. Marcus' house, at an arcade just a block and a half away, with Pat. Pat's note had been on the rooftop where Bug took photos. Had Tim read it, re-folded it, and left it behind on purpose? Had it fallen out of his pocket by mistake? Dick didn't know, but the note was there, which meant that Tim was there.

Second, Tim was a photographer who made his own black-and-white

prints and freely admitted to paying for prints of his digital shots when he needed to. In fact, he'd gotten some done recently, Dick realized, looking at the waterfront photo that Tim had just given him. It was wild to think that Tim might have gotten pictures of his friends printed at the same time as shots of that arsonist in action or those wannabe bank robbers.

And lastly, Tim was a skilled hacker. He'd outsmarted the manor's security system and only got caught because of the secondary Cave systems that he didn't know about. If he could do that, was it really so unreasonable to think that he could get into the GCPD network and take remote control of Jim Gordon's computer? And, Dick realized, remembering the trap that Bruce had asked Barbara to set up after that, Bug hadn't tried it again. Bug was too smart to fall for that, the same way that Dick knew Tim wouldn't be sneaking out of Bruce's house again any time soon.

Dick pulled all of Tim's photos out of their envelopes and spread them across his desk. Only once they were all there did he remember what was, in retrospect, the most obvious piece of the puzzle: back in July, Tim had showed Dick pictures he'd taken of a known felon on the loose in Metropolis. At the time, Dick hadn't known how good Tim was with a camera, so he'd believed the story about taking the picture by accident. He'd also believed—

Oh.

Back then, Dick had believed Tim's story— that he was freaked out by seeing the man from the news and wanted to tell someone, but he didn't want Bruce to get him in trouble. Dick had accepted—he'd been a little too willing to accept—Tim's offer of allyship, of brotherly solidarity. But Dick could see the manipulation now, clear as day. Everything about Tim's story was designed to draw Dick in, to make Dick believe him when he said that this was all just an accident, and to convince Dick to protect him against Bruce.

Why, though? Why had he told Dick about that and showed him the photograph?

It was blindingly, painfully obvious: Tim knew Dick Grayson was Nightwing. Which meant he almost certainly knew Bruce Wayne was Batman.

Dick took a deep breath and walked away from the desk, beginning to pace. As he did, he put himself in the kid's shoes for a moment. Tim—

Bug—had been in a tight spot that day back in July. He'd had information to give the police and, by extension, Batman. But he didn't have a film camera at the time, and no way to make his own prints. He couldn't really make an excuse to get away to get his digital shots printed, either— not when he was still so new to the household. And even if he did, he couldn't send the photos anonymously; it would be too convenient if he, a Gotham-based teenager known for taking pictures, just happened to be in Metropolis at the same time as Bug, a Gotham-based informant known for taking pictures. The connection would have been instantly obvious to Bruce, and Tim would have been caught in seconds.

So Tim had rolled the dice that morning and decided to trust Dick—to trust Nightwing—instead.

Because he knew that Dick Grayson was Nightwing, and Bruce Wayne was Batman.

This was bad. This was *really* bad. Dick didn't know what to do.

Bruce had contingencies, of course. He had pages and pages of plans outlining what to do in case one or both of their identities were ever compromised. But none of those plans had accounted for the possibility that a kid—that a kid who was, at this moment, inside Bruce's own house—would find out without him knowing. Bruce had chosen to tell both Dick and Jason— Jason too soon, in Dick's opinion, but the point was that *Bruce* had made that decision. Neither Dick nor Jason had stumbled into the knowledge by accident.

Dick wondered how Tim had figured it out. What had he seen? What had he found?

And what in the hell was Bruce thinking? Dick thought, just as he had when Alfred first told him the news that Bruce was taking in a foster kid. How did Bruce not see this coming? Why wasn't he more careful?

It didn't matter. Tim knew their secret, and what he could do with that knowledge... it was almost unthinkable, the damage he could cause. One call to his case worker, and Bruce would be ruined.

Dick had to warn him. He had to tell Bruce he was compromised before Tim—

Wait.

Dick stopped moving and found himself in the kitchen. He barely saw

his surroundings as his mind continued to race.

Tim had known Dick was Nightwing the day he showed Dick the pictures from Metropolis. That was almost two months ago now. In other words, Tim had known about his secret identity—and presumably Bruce's too—for that entire time, and he hadn't done anything with that information aside from giving Dick a tip about an escaped convict and using Bruce's envelopes to deliver intel to the GCPD.

In other words, Tim had had the power to destroy Bruce Wayne for weeks. Surely he could have done so by now. Since he hadn't, Dick could only conclude that Tim—that *Bug*—didn't want to.

It made sense. Bug had been helping Batman and the GCPD for a while now. Dick wasn't actually sure when he started, but it dated back to before Jason's death, because Dick remembered Jason telling him once about a package of photographs that had shown up at Gordon's office. Bug knew how important Batman was to Gotham City. Bug believed in and supported Batman's mission any way he could. And he'd proven that back in July, when he'd found a way to get intel to Batman even when the traditional channels were closed to him. Bug had trusted that Nightwing would protect his source.

And he'd been right.

It was still dangerous. If one of Batman's enemies ever found out that Tim knew who was under the masks, Tim could be in serious danger—just like Alfred or Babs or Dr. Thompkins would be if anyone figured out that they knew. It was a risk. Worse, it was a risk that Bruce was unaware of.

Bruce would be *furious* if he found out Dick knew about this and didn't tell him.

Dick turned on his heel and went back through the living room, down the hall, and into his bedroom. Bug's photos were still spread out on the desk. Dick's eyes fell to them once more— from the black-and-white shots that Tim had developed in Bruce's own house to the digital photos he took with the camera that Dick gave him for his birthday.

Batman could get mad at him all he liked, Dick decided, as he gathered the pictures up again and slotted them back into their proper envelopes. Nightwing was going to protect Bug.

Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Tim enjoys a Friday night out with his friends, until Gotham City intervenes.

“I think that guy has a gun,” Bernard murmured.

“I know,” Tim whispered back. “Get down.”

Chapter Notes

I have returned! I wasn't planning to post until next Tuesday, but then I thought, what better way to kick off Pride Month than to share a chapter all about Tim's queer friends?

On a related note, remember that tag about how I'm throwing canon in a blender? Well, let's just say it's time for a smoothie, babey!

On an unrelated note: warning for crime and guns in this chapter. Don't worry, no one gets hurt! Just another night in beautiful Gotham City.

Updates to come every other Tuesday as per usual for at least the next 8 weeks (4 chapters done!). After that, we'll see. Thanks as ever for your patience and support.

Love,
MrsD

Up until the shoe store, Tim had been having a really good night.

It was Friday, so he went to the mall with his friends after dinner. This was a new tradition, and he was worried that Alfred wouldn’t let him go tonight, given that Bruce was out of town. (Supposedly he was on a business trip for WE, but Tim had doubts. Unfortunately, so far he’d failed to figure out what Batman was really up to.)

But, to Tim’s surprise, going to the mall wasn’t even a question. Apparently, like Bruce, Alfred was pretty fond of Tim’s friends—which was also new. Tim wasn’t used to a parental figure even asking his friends’ names, let alone caring about their wellbeing and assuring Tim they’d be welcome to come over to the manor any time. (Tim...

wasn't quite ready for that yet.)

Alfred dropped him off at the mall entrance around 7 and reminded him that he was to call no later than 9:30 to arrange a pick-up to get back to the manor by 10. Tim promised he would and headed inside, pretending he didn't notice that the black Rolls Royce stayed where it was for another minute or two. Since his failed attempt to go Bat-watching in August, Tim had been well aware of how closely he was being watched, and he was in no hurry to break Alfred's (or Bruce's) trust again any time soon. He'd figure out a way to fly under the radar and get back out there eventually, but it would take time, just like fixing Bruce's security system and finding Batman's base of operations would take time.

He was close. To finding the base, that was. Earlier this week, he'd gotten his hands on some blueprints that didn't make a lot of sense. According to the blueprints, Wayne Manor didn't have a basement, which wasn't strange in some parts of the country, but was strange for Gotham City— especially Bruce's neighbourhood. Just a mile down the road, Drake Manor even had a *sub-basement.* The Drakes never went down there, but still.

Tim puzzled over this some more as he made his way through the mall to get to the food court. Once, when he was really little and obsessed with dump trucks and cranes and construction workers, his father had carried him down the trapdoor into the sub-basement and showed him the old stone foundation. There was one room in particular where a large rock jutted out because it had been easier and cheaper to build the house around it than it was to move it. Tim had gotten scared of that dark lump, and had cried to go back upstairs, much to Jack's annoyance.

So he found it hard to believe that Wayne Manor wouldn't have a basement— or more. Sure, Wayne Manor was older than his parents' house, but based on Tim's research into construction methods of the time, that should have meant it was even more likely that Bruce's house would have a deep basement and a stone foundation, just like Drake Manor.

He was forced to set his musings when he got to the food court. Most of his friends were already there— except Ives, who was running late as usual. Finding out that his old friend Ives—only grown-ups called him Sebastian—was friends with Pat at Pat's Labour Day party had been a pleasant surprise. Tim had lost touch with him when he left Gotham Academy. Now that Tim was back, they'd been hanging out a

lot, and he'd reconnected with some of that old circle, though not everything was the same. Callie, who used to date Ives, had pierced her nose and dyed her dark hair a bright orange colour since the last time Tim knew her. She was also dating Ariana now, a girl that Tim had had a crush on in eighth grade. He hadn't had the courage to ask her out back then, and things in his life had started to spiral not long after that, but seeing her wrap her arms around Callie and kiss her on the cheek set off a funny feeling in the pit of Tim's stomach and made him wonder if there was still something there.

Two new faces had joined their little crew last week: Bernard and Darla. They were new to Gotham Academy this year; their old high school had burned down over the summer. They were fitting in well—Darla was a gothy, self-described witch, so she gave Pat eyeliner tips and let Callie borrow her tube of black lipstick to try it out. Bernard, meanwhile, was just as much of a nerd as Ives, joining the Wizards and Warriors club on his literal first day at the Academy while starting his own video game meet-up. He and Tim and Pat talked true crime, too, though neither Pat nor Tim could keep Bernard from going off the deep end in terms of not-boring crime theories. (Someday, Tim would have to get him and Bruce in the same room, just to see what happened.)

Everybody greeted Tim when he arrived, and Pat hopped up to join him in his quest for a snack and a drink. They hit the popcorn kiosk, just like they did last week, and Tim got an extra large bag with vegan butter, because Ari and Callie had gone vegan, and they would definitely have a few (hundred) handfuls of it.

When they got back to the table, Ives had arrived. He and Bernard were already talking about their W&W campaign, while Callie immediately pulled Pat into a conversation about something one of their shared enemies had done in biology class on Thursday. Tim chuckled to himself and opened the popcorn, setting it in the centre of the table to make sure everyone knew it was there to share.

Sure enough, Ariana reached over at once. She'd already grabbed some before stopping to confirm: "Vegan?"

"Yep," Tim said, just like he did last week, and sank into the chair beside her.

She gave him a quick, blinding smile. "You're the best."

"I know," Tim said, shaking off the surprising way that she'd just

made his stomach flutter.

Ari didn't notice; she was already turning back to Callie and Pat. "Well, I heard her father works for Rupert Thorne," she said.

"Who, Cecily?" asked Pat.

"Cecily's dad's an doctor," Callie countered with a frown.

"Oh." Ariana crunched a handful of popcorn. "Maybe it was one of the other ones."

"Courtney?" Pat suggested.

"Her dad's dead," said Callie.

"The third one then," said Ariana. She scrunched her nose and made a face. "What the heck is her name?"

"Oh," said Callie. Her face matched her girlfriend's almost exactly. "Oh my gosh. I can't remember."

"It starts with a C," said Darla.

Callie laughed. Ariana reached for more popcorn. "Of course it does," she said. "They used to call themselves The Three Cs."

"Ugh," said Pat, with a pointed slurp of their slushie.

"Crystal?" Ariana guessed. "Clover?"

"Cauliflower," Ives jumped in from the other end of the table. Pat snorted.

Callie rolled her eyes. "Yes, I'm sure her parents named her *Cauliflower."*

"Well, if they're dumb enough to work for Rupert Thorne..." Bernard muttered.

Silently, Tim agreed. Out loud, he said, "It's Chloe."

"Chloe!" Ariana repeated, then glanced around their table like she was embarrassed— or maybe she was worried that someone close by with that name would think she was talking to them. A few people at other tables were looking over, but thankfully their eyes didn't linger.

“How did you know that?” Pat asked Tim.

Tim shrugged. “The Three Cs invited me to sit at their table on the first day of school.”

“Whaaaat.”

The stretched-out single syllable came from Ives, but when Tim glanced up, he found everyone staring at him. His cheeks went warm.

“Cecily’s mom and my mom are on the Gotham General Hospital Foundation board,” he explained. “We’d hang out together sometimes at the galas.”

“But not since…” Pat began.

“No. I haven’t talked to her since I moved out of my parents’ place,” Tim said, answering their unspoken question. In his peripheral vision, Ariana and Callie shared a surprised look, but neither said anything.

“Does she know about that?” asked Ives.

Tim shrugged again. “Probably,” he said. “I mean, there was a public statement from Drake Industries—”

“Oh,” said Darla suddenly. Tim glanced over in surprise. “You’re the Drake heir,” she said. “I overheard my dad, uh.” Her face went red. “Sorry, I—”

“It’s okay,” Tim said, taking pity on her. “And, for what it’s worth, I don’t really think I am anymore, so…”

There was a beat of awkward silence around the table, then Ari said, “Sorry, Tim. I didn’t know.”

“Yeah, that sucks,” Callie agreed. “Sorry I missed that headline.”

“It’s okay. Thanks,” Tim added quickly, before anyone could ask any questions about where he was currently living. So far, he’d managed to avoid being spotted with Bruce by walking to school from Pat’s every morning. Ives was the only other one at the table who knew, because Tim had told him at Pat’s party, but that was it, and he could be trusted to keep it quiet.

Pat helpfully changed the subject. “Chloe was probably just pretending to be nice to see what she could get out of you.”

“Yeah, more than half the rumours at school can be traced back to The Three Cs,” Ariana chimed in, rolling her eyes.

“Sounds like something The Three Cs would do,” said Darla, like she’d been going to Gotham Academy all her life.

“You’re better off with us losers, Tim,” Callie agreed, grinning through a mouthful of popcorn.

“Speak for yourself,” Pat scoffed. *“I’m* cool, at least.”

Ives gave Pat an assessing look, then made a so-so gesture with one hand. The table erupted in laughter.

“Says the tallest guy in school who keeps flunking the basketball team tryouts,” Pat teased back.

“Not my fault,” Ives protested. Whether by accident or good timing, he used his overly-long reach to grab some popcorn. “I have BIF Syndrome.”

“BIF?” Bernard repeated with an uncertain smile.

“Ball In Face,” Pat and Tim said in unison.

“Remember that time you took me to a Gaslamps game and got hit with a foul ball?” Callie laughed.

“Almost hit,” Ives corrected her.

“Yeah. Because I caught it in time and saved your ass.”

“My butch queen,” said Ariana, faking a swoon into Callie’s arms.

“The point is, you are not the arbiter of *cool,”* Pat told Ives.

“Okay, Sherlock,” said Tim. Pat’s face went pink, and everyone laughed some more.

“Sad to say, I think we’re all losers, guys,” Ariana declared. She raised her frappuccino, and everyone ‘clinked’ their cups and bottles to it.

“You seem pretty cool to me,” Bernard said quietly, and when Tim glanced over, Bernard’s blue-grey eyes were on him, and he was smiling.

Tim smiled back, and then let himself get tugged into the conversation

around him again.

The food court eventually got boring, so they walked around the mall for while. Darla called it window-shopping; Ives called it collecting dirty looks from cashiers and security guards. He kept a running tally. So far, they had four more than last week.

Despite her best efforts, Callie had a 9:00 curfew, so the group walked her and Ariana to the train station a little after 8:30. After waving them off, Pat suggested the park, but it was kind of far, and most of them, like Tim, had to start heading back in less than an hour. So they wandered the streets around the train station, looking in shop windows and chatting about nothing in particular.

Tim wasn't really paying attention until he suddenly noticed that he and Bernard were a step ahead of everyone else. They exchanged a quick look, then turned back to find Darla, Pat, and Ives pressed to the window of a shoe store they'd just passed. Darla and Pat were fixated on a sparkling pair of stilettos, while Ives stared at sneakers so white they shone under the window's display lights.

"Limited edition," he murmured.

"Do you think they're too fancy for the semi-formal?" Darla asked Pat. Pat shook their head, their mouth hanging slightly open.

"Wonder how much," said Ives, squinting like he could see the price tag from here.

"The store's open, guys," Bernard said, pointing to the sign on the door.

Tim checked his watch and winced. "Closing at nine?" They only had seven minutes.

"Ten, actually," said Bernard. He reached for the handle. "Shall we?"

Everyone seemed uncertain about the idea. (Later, Tim would wonder if this was some kind of group premonition.) But after a short debate, they went in. Bernard held the door open for all of them.

Upon entering, Tim realized the store's front window display was misleading. From the outside, the store looked elegant and refined, with a minimalist aesthetic. Inside, it was a mess of narrow, overflowing shelves and crowded pathways. The shelves ran

perpendicular to the front door, giving the impression of walking straight into a wall. Tim was instantly reminded of those few weeks he spent at Mrs. Douglas' apartment, where the main door opened into a tiny, closed-off foyer. Coming in the door and trying to remove his shoes and jacket without stepping onto the living room carpet *and* without letting the dog escape into the hall was almost impossible.

The cash register was in the back right corner, behind a wrap-around counter. An old-fashioned silver bell sat on the countertop, its shiny surface reflecting the fluorescent tube lights overhead. There was no one at the register, but Tim could hear two voices in the far left corner, so he could tell the store wasn't empty. At the end of each row was a padded bench and a floor-level mirror, alongside scattered boxes with shoes and loose pieces of tissue paper poking out. It gave the impression of a busy day that had just ended, like the staff hadn't had time to tidy up yet.

Tim and his friends glanced at each other. Pat shrugged. Ives nodded. Darla's eyes kept hopping around like she was trying to spot the stilettos from the window. She took the first step forward. The rest followed her into the racks of shoe boxes. They quickly got separated, with Darla and Pat turning a corner into what seemed to be the women's section while Bernard and Ives disappeared into a rack topped with men's sneakers. For his part, Tim wandered up and down the narrow paths between the shelves, trying to track down and quiet his unease. He'd never thought of himself as claustrophobic, so what was bothering him so much about this place?

As he neared the back left corner of the store, he got an answer.

"Shit. I didn't hear those kids come in," an older man was saying. His voice rasped like he smoked two packs a day. "Why didn't I hear the door chime?"

"I disabled it," said another man— much younger and rather nasal.

"What?! Why?"

"Because it's linked to the security system?" Nasal sounded like he was guessing on a game show. "And you said—"

"I said plausible deniability," said Smoker. "What in the hell's *plausible* about shutting the alarm off while we're still open?"

Nasal guessed again. "Um, because we're open? I thought we only had to arm it at night when we closed up."

“Oh my god,” Smoker exclaimed in a whisper. “You *moron,* why—? You know what, never mind. We still got two minutes, I’m gonna call him and push it back. You, get those goddamn kids out of here.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, tell them we’re closing early or something!”

“Yeah, but what if they ask why?”

“I don’t fucking care! Just—”

The front door opened before he could finish. There was no chime, but the floorboards creaked under heavy boots. Tim ducked his head slightly until he could see through the shelves and out the end of the adjacent aisle. A man was approaching the cash register, dressed all in black, with a—*shit*—with a ski mask over his face.

Tim swallowed hard. Maybe this wasn’t what it looked like, he thought desperately. Maybe it was just suddenly very cold out. (He knew it wasn’t cold.)

He heard a sound before he could figure out what to do. It was a very specific sound, a *click-click!* that he recognized from movies and TV. He’d never heard it in person, though. His blood turned to ice. He was frozen in place.

Then, the bell on the counter rang, bright and loud in the nearly silent store.

Like it was a signal, Tim unfroze. He dropped into a crouch and slipped silently back around the corner where he’d last seen his friends.

“Hello! Anybody home?” called a deep male voice, muffled by the mask.

Tim found Darla and Pat edging towards the other end of their row, towards the cash register and the man with a gun.

Tim got their attention. *“Psst!”*

They both turned. “Wha—” Darla started to say, but Tim shook his head and waved them over.

“Stay out of sight,” he whispered. “Pat, call 9-1-1, but keep your voice down.”

They stared at him for a beat, then Pat nodded and took out their phone. Tim nodded back and snuck around the rack to find Ives and Bernard. They were at the end of their row, too, watching a young man with bleached hair lift the gate and get behind the counter. Tim hissed again, but the employee spoke at the same time, and Tim's friends didn't hear.

"Hi, yes, sir, how can I help you?" said the young man with a nasally voice.

"I think that guy has a gun," Bernard murmured when Tim reached them.

"I know," Tim whispered back. "Get down."

Bernard crouched at once, but Ives stayed standing. In fact, he seemed to be moving closer to the counter.

"Hey, hey, man, we don't want no trouble," said another voice— it was the older man, the smoker. "You want money? Pete, open the till."

"Ives!" Tim whispered urgently.

But it was too late— the cashier's wide green eyes were on fixed on them. The man at the counter started to turn, raising the shotgun in his hands.

Time slowed down. It must have, because Tim was somehow faster. He grabbed Ives by the arm and yanked. Ives fell practically on top of him, but it didn't matter, because an ear-splitting *bang!* came a second later, and three boxes of shoes rained down on both of them.

"Shit," said someone— the gunman, Tim thought, though he didn't dare try to move enough that he could see. "Shit!"

"Hey, it's okay. It's okay, calm down," said the older employee.

"What the fuck, Olsen!" the gunman exclaimed. "You said the place would be empty! Easy-peasy, you said! Win-win, you said!"

The older man, Olsen, shouted something back. Tim judged them to be distracted enough and shifted slightly, trying to get out from under Ives.

"Are you okay?" he whispered.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine,” Ives replied. “You?”

“Fine.” Tim winced when another shoe box rolled off him, but thankfully the argument between Olsen and the gunman had escalated, and they didn’t seem to notice the sound.

“The gun was supposed to be a prop!” the gunman yelled. “I wasn’t supposed to have to use it!”

“Relax. You didn’t hit anybody,” said Olsen.

“You think that matters? I’ve got two strikes, man! No judge in Gotham is gonna give me a break.”

There was another *click-click.* Tim and Ives both froze.

“So I’m thinking maybe I cut my losses.” The gunman’s voice was icy calm now, sending a chill through Tim’s entire body.

“Hey, hey,” said Olsen. “Just— just take a breath, man.”

“If I’m gonna do twenty years anyway, what’s life?” asked the gunman. “Especially if you set me up on purpose.”

“Hey, I wouldn’t do that,” Olsen said at once. “You know me, you know I’d never—”

“This place was supposed to be empty,” the gunman repeated. “No witnesses, nobody gets hurt. Easy money for me, insurance money for you. Instead, we got a room full of kids— *kids, Olsen!”*

“I’m sorry,” Olsen blurted out. “It was a screw-up, okay? Just, please, put the gun down.”

“Put the gun down!” someone echoed from the direction of the front door.

It was someone loud, someone authoritative— a cop. Tim heard and felt Ives breathe a sigh of relief, but Tim wasn’t ready to relax just yet.

The gunman raised the shotgun again. Tim flinched.

“Put it down now!” the cop repeated. “We have the building surrounded, there’s nowhere to go!”

“Motherfucker,” said the gunman, but he lowered the gun to the floor and raised his hands above his head.

Booted feet swarmed into the store, thumping and creaking like they were testing the weight capacity of the old wood floorboards.

The gunman was escorted away, ranting and raving about how the cops needed to arrest the employees, too, but no one seemed to be listening. Tim watched them go without making eye contact.

One of the officers helped Tim and Ives to their feet. Another was talking to Pat, since they were the one who'd made the 9-1-1 call. Darla was crying. Bernard was hyperventilating. Tim's knees felt watery.

Thankfully, there was a bench at the end of the aisle. He took a step in its direction, and when no one stopped him, he carried on. The cushion was ripped, and it let out some air as he sank onto it.

He was... just gonna sit here for a bit. He hoped that was okay with everybody.

Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

> Tim Drake vs. the Gotham City Police Department (Round 2). Bug vs. Nightwing (gulp!).
>
> *Tim forced himself to stay still as the cop drew near again. "Fuck!" he said under his breath, but evidently it was still loud enough, because—*
>
> *"Hey, now. Watch your language," said a new voice from behind them. A voice Tim knew. A voice that was cheerful, almost laughing —*
>
> *No.*

Dick was late. He'd been late when he left Blüdhaven an hour ago, and that was *before* the Friday night traffic into Gotham had decided to screw him over.

It did that every now and then— often enough that he should have been able to plan for it, rarely enough that he'd begun to assign it a superstitious weight, treating the traffic conditions like some kind of omen. When traffic was bad, his night/day/weekend in Gotham was probably gonna be bad, too. This seemed to be true whether he was in Gotham for civilian or vigilante reasons, with both some of his worst arguments with Bruce and most difficult missions with Batman following a drive that took three times as long as it was supposed to.

(The rational part of his brain told him that maybe this was a self-fulfilling prophecy: *bad drive equals bad mood equals bad experience.* Or that maybe he was being selective in observing the outcomes and falling victim to confirmation bias. But the irrational part of his brain was just... louder sometimes. When something went wrong, it had a habit of yelling, *See? See what you did?* And it was so hard for Dick not to listen.*)*

So, by the time he pulled off the highway and started down the road that would take him to Wayne Manor, he was already expecting the worst. It came when he was only five minutes out, in the form of a call from Alfred that interrupted the upbeat music he'd been playing in an attempt to ward off the bad traffic vibes.

“I know, I know, I’m late,” he said as soon as he picked up. “I told you I’d be there for 9, and I’m not, I’m sorry. But I promise, I’m right around the corner!”

“Please go downstairs directly,” said Alfred, and the chagrined smile fell off Dick’s face at once. “Use the back entrance. I have everything ready.”

Dick’s eyes shot up to the rearview mirror. No one was behind him. He braked and completed a neat three-point turn, heading back towards the winding side road that would take him to the Batcave.

“What’s the situation?” he asked, but it came out more like a barked order than a question. Thankfully, Alfred didn’t seem to mind.

“It’s Master Tim,” he answered.

Dick’s heart dropped. True to the decision he’d made a couple weeks ago, he hadn’t told a soul about Tim’s secret identity as Bug. And with Tim grounded and then starting school, he hadn’t been too worried about the kid sneaking out. Still, he’d kept an eye out whenever he was in Gotham, just in case, even going so far as to come into the city once in a while without Bruce knowing, just to check that Tim was where he was supposed to be and that there’d been no new intel drops from Bug.

Dick turned onto the hidden road a little too fast, the spray of gravel making it sound like there was an angry cat in his wheel wells. Alfred, meanwhile, kept talking.

“This is only the second time he’s gone out with this group of friends,” he explained. “Last week, we had no issues at all: he called at the agreed-upon time, and he was exactly where he said he’d be when I picked him up.”

“Not so much tonight, though?” Dick guessed, cursing himself. He should have seen this coming. He should have gotten to Gotham in time for dinner, as Alfred had originally suggested. With Bruce out of town *(extremely* out of town, since he wasn’t currently on planet Earth), Dick should have known that Tim would try something.

But why is this a Nightwing thing? he desperately wanted to ask. He couldn’t. Not on an insecure line.

“He was supposed to call at 9:30,” said Alfred. “It’s only five minutes past, but I fear something may have happened.”

Dick hit the transponder in his watch to open the Batcave's hidden entrance. He practically flew down the narrow tunnel, screeching to a halt beside the Batmobile just a few minutes later. He leapt out of the car and jogged up the stairs to the central platform.

"Approximately fifteen minutes ago, there was a 9-1-1 call from a shoe store near the train station where I picked Tim up last week," Alfred continued, handing him a fresh suit so smoothly that Dick barely had to slow down.

"So that's why," he muttered, going straight to the change room.

"Pardon me?" said Alfred, sounding like he was already several feet behind him.

"What was the call about?" Dick asked, raising his voice as he closed the door and started pulling off his jeans. "Was it Tim?"

"Armed robbery," Alfred answered— much closer now. "And no. But I believe it was young Pat on the telephone. I have the audio here."

"Play it."

Dick listened while a young, whispered voice give the dispatcher an address. The kid explained that there was a masked man with a shotgun threatening the cashier. There was a sound in the background of the call that Dick couldn't quite identify— it was like muffled music, or perhaps just faint voices that his ears were interpreting as music. Dick closed his eyes and stopped moving, listening more closely to see if he could make out any of the words being said.

So the loud, sudden gunshot made him jump about a foot in the air.

"Fuck," he sighed, throwing open the door again, now fully suited up.

It was a testament to how frazzled Alfred was that he didn't say a word about Dick's language. He just handed him his escrima sticks and an earpiece, along with the keys to his motorcycle. They did a quick comms check as Dick strode over to his bike.

"I've been monitoring the emergency services' radio channel," Alfred said, catching up while Dick pulled on his helmet. "But I can't seem to determine any details about the shoe store— whether there were any injuries, or what have you."

Dick nodded and stuck his key in the ignition. There was still one

question he felt the need to ask. “Why did you come straight down here to check 9-1-1 records when Tim didn’t call you on time?”

The look Alfred gave him said the answer should have been obvious. “With this family?”

“Yeah, fair enough,” Dick conceded. He started the engine, then met Alfred’s eyes through the helmet’s visor. “I’ll find him,” he promised. “I’ll get him home.”

Alfred nodded and stepped back. Dick shifted his bike into gear and shot off back down the tunnel. He couldn’t stop hearing that young, whispering voice, interrupted by that gunshot. If Alfred was right (and he usually was), that was Tim’s more-than-a-friend on the phone, the kid whose letter he’d left on a rooftop last month to photograph a crime in progress. Was Bug the reason Tim’s friends were in the store at the time of the robbery? How close had Pat been to the gun? How close was *Tim?*

On the other side of the hidden door, Dick shifted into a higher gear and sped towards the city. Traffic, he noticed, was suddenly light.

Tim watched the blue and red lights flicker over Pat’s face as they climbed into the front seat of a police cruiser. They lifted one hand to wave at Tim before closing their door.

Tim waved back. Pat was the last of them to leave, besides himself. The siren chirped, and as the car pulled away from the curb, Tim glanced over his shoulder at the sergeant who was holding the scene. He was annoyed to discover that the cop was still paying attention.

“Okay, kid, your turn,” he said, picking up the receiver of his shoulder radio. *Biala*, the nametag just under it read. “Tell me your address, I’ll get one of my officers to drive you home.”

Tim’s mother’s outraged voice played inside his head. *A police car, Timothy?*

Then, his father: *This is the thanks Bruce Wayne gets for taking you in?*

Nope, Tim agreed silently, turning around with a polite smile on his lips. He’d decided—after freaking out on the bench inside for a solid six-and-a-half minutes—that the only way he was going to get through this was by making sure that Bruce never, *ever* found out about tonight. That meant no names on his statement, no addresses, and

definitely no ride to Wayne Manor in a cruiser.

Sergeant Biala sighed, shaking Tim out of his thoughts. “Look, I can let you get away with an anonymous witness statement, but I need to make sure you get home safe. Other than me and the officer driving you, I promise nobody’ll know where you live. I won’t even write the address down, okay?”

Tim doubted that. The minute—the *second*—the officer behind the wheel realized where he was taking Tim, he’d be selling the story to every tabloid in a 100-mile radius.

Think of the headlines! Tim’s mother exclaimed.

You’d humiliate Mr. Wayne like that? his father demanded. *Shouldn’t be surprised, given how you treated us.*

He’s right, his mother chimed in. *You shouldn’t have even been at this store in the first place. You should have known something would—*

“Kid?” Biala prompted. Tim re-focused and noticed Biala’s look of concern. That wouldn’t do.

“I can get a ride,” he assured him. “Just need to make a call.”

Biala hadn’t been convinced when he’d said that ten minutes ago, and he didn’t seem convinced now. “We’ve cordoned off the street, kid. They’re not gonna be able to get through.”

Spotting an opportunity, Tim said, “Then I’ll just walk a block or two, and—”

“Alone? Downtown, at this time of night?” Biala shook his head. “Not a chance in hell.”

“I’ll take the bus, then,” said Tim, hating how desperate he was starting to sound.

To Tim’s surprise—and mortification—Biala’s expression suddenly softened. “Is there something going on at home, son? Some reason you don’t want to go?”

Tim exhaled a short, frustrated breath and ignored the question. “You can’t keep me here. I’m 18,” he lied.

Biala’s friendly eyes hardened. “You got any ID that can prove that?”

“I don’t need to be 18 to know how to take the bus,” Tim retorted before he could stop himself.

Another surprise: Biala laughed. It was short and bitter, raspy with too many cigarettes. “Smart ass, huh?” he said, and Tim tensed up, sensing danger. “Now, come on. Either tell me where you live, or I call Child Services and get you an emergency foster placement for the night.”

Tim swallowed hard. Calling Child Services was a worst case scenario — way worse than embarrassing Bruce by showing up on his doorstep escorted by the GCPD. If Biala called Child Services, Lillian would get involved, and if Lillian got involved, then she’d no doubt try and call Bruce. And if she tried to call Bruce, well, Bruce wasn’t home. Would he get accused of negligence, for letting Tim go out without supervision? That would be really, *really* bad. In addition to bringing Bruce unwanted attention, this could cause real, tangible harm to him and his reputation.

Oh, so now *you care about things like that,* his father snarled.

Why must you do this to everyone who tries to help you? asked his mother, less nasty but no less disappointed.

Biala interpreted Tim’s silence as stubborn refusal. “Of course, there is a third option,” he said, his tone turning steely. “I can take you down to the station and run your fingerprints. The way you’ve been acting, I’m beginning to think maybe you’re in at least one of our databases. Got an outstanding warrant, maybe?”

It was a bluff, an empty threat. Tim was (almost) positive that his prints weren’t in any GCPD files. It wasn’t like he’d ever been arrested. But what if he was wrong? Worse, what if he was wrong *and* someone in the station recognized him— either as the son of the Drakes, or as the kid that was sometimes in the neighbourhood when a package of photos was found? The last few hand-offs hadn’t gone as smoothly as he’d hoped, after all. It was possible he’d been spotted.

Without meaning to, Tim imagined Bruce having his suspicions confirmed this way— through a call from the GCPD. Suddenly, Tim had a hard time breathing. Even though he was outside, it felt like walls were closing in around him. If he thought he’d been desperate a moment ago, that was nothing compared to this.

His eyes darted from side to side, and he reached into his pocket for his wallet. “Listen, I have money,” he said in an undertone, but Biala

didn't let him get any further than that.

"Are you trying to *bribe* me?" he asked, outraged and *way* too loud.

Yes! cried his mother.

"No!" Tim exclaimed. "No, I meant, like, I can get a cab."

"Uh huh," said Biala, skeptical.

Tim forced himself to breathe out, slow and measured. "I promise, Sergeant, I can get home safely on my own."

Biala assessed him, his icy blue eyes taking him in from top to bottom and back again. "Okay."

Tim felt a flash of hope, then—

"Come on, we're doing this hard way."

"No— okay, I'll tell you the address," Tim blurted out. His eyes were stinging, his heart racing. *This could not be happening!*

"That was a limited-time offer, and it's expired," said Biala.

He reached for Tim's arm. Tim yanked it away instinctively, then realized what he was doing—and how dangerous it was—when Biala's expression set like stone. Tim forced himself to stay still as Biala drew near again.

"Fuck!" Tim said under his breath, but evidently it was still loud enough, because—

"Hey, now. Watch your language," said a new voice from behind them.

A voice Tim knew. A voice that was cheerful, almost laughing—

No.

Tim's heart stopped. In fact, everything stopped. Kind of like it had in the store when the gunman turned around, Tim saw every tiny change in Biala's expression like he was watching at half-speed. He watched Biala's shoulders twist, felt Biala's hand tug him into turning around as well. With feet made of lead, Tim moved, keeping his eyes down like if he just didn't look up, it wouldn't be true; he wouldn't be face-to-face with—

“Evening, Nightwing,” said Biala, a smile now in his voice. “A little late to the party, don’t you think? Could’ve used your help earlier.”

“It’s a big city, Sergeant,” Nightwing replied affably. “But hey, I’m here now. Can I, uh, take something off your hands?”

Tim dared to glance up. Nightwing’s white lenses were retracted. Tim thought that he winked in the split-second that they made eye contact, but it was so fast he couldn’t be sure.

Meanwhile, Biala was giving Tim the side eye. “You think the big guy can get him to tell me where he lives? Or what his name is?”

Oh no, Tim thought, his panic rising again. *The big guy—* was Bruce not actually out of town? Was he about to find himself face-to-cowl with Batman? That was *so much* worse than coming back to the manor in a cop car, or getting busted by the police, or even having Nightwing show up out of the blue like this.

Biala sighed. Tim suddenly realized that he’d missed a pretty crucial part of the conversation while he was spiralling. But Biala was letting go of his arm now and walking away. Tim watched him go with wide eyes.

How in the hell did that just happen?

“Come on, kid,” said Nightwing. Like being pulled by a magnet, Tim’s gaze snapped back. Nightwing was smiling. “Want to see the Batmobile up close and personal?”

It was a dirty trick, and Tim *hated* how well it worked. He didn’t even have to think about it— he nodded, and Nightwing jerked his head for Tim to follow. No one even batted an eye as they wove around the cruisers and away from the busy crime scene. Tim’s feet moved on their own, one after another as his brain checked out again, tracing and retracing the panic of what would happen if Nightwing was leading him straight to Batman.

Eventually, Nightwing stopped, and Tim did, too, finding himself in a dead-end alley. He glanced around, peering into every shadowy corner, but there was no sign of Batman— or his car, for that matter.

“I lied,” Nightwing said suddenly, like he knew exactly what Tim was doing. “We didn’t bring the Batmobile tonight.”

“Oh.” Tim’s voice wavered— uncertain, hopeful. “So...?”

“How about something better?” Nightwing offered. He pointed up. They were standing between two older office buildings, their windows mostly dark. Between them, there was a strip of light-polluted night sky. Tim frowned, wondering what Nightwing was pointing at.

“Batjet?” he guessed.

Nightwing snorted. “Not this time,” he said. “I meant the roof. Want to go up with me?”

Tim squinted into the dark. He couldn’t tell how tall the buildings were, but he guessed between eight and ten storeys. “Uh...”

“You’re not afraid of heights,” Nightwing said, his eyes meeting Tim’s.

It wasn’t a question; Nightwing knew he wasn’t afraid. “No,” Tim agreed quietly.

“I can just take you home if you want,” Nightwing said. “But I was kinda hoping to talk to you for a minute first. Can’t beat the rooftops for privacy.”

Tim gulped. Nightwing wanted to *talk?* That sounded bad. But he was still smiling, so... maybe it wasn’t?

Only one way to find out, he thought. “Okay.”

Nightwing’s grin was all Dick. He unfolded a harness from... somewhere *(where?* He didn’t even have a utility belt!), then fastened the clips to Tim with fingers that didn’t hesitate.

“Comfy?” he asked, tugging at the straps. “Not too tight?”

“No, they’re okay,” said Tim, still reeling.

Nightwing pulled him into his arms and showed him where to hang on. Then he raised one hand straight up over his head. “Ready?”

“Sure?”

The grapnel gun was quieter than Tim expected. He felt more than heard it hook into place above them, and he had just enough time—a fraction of a second—to notice the change in the tension of the line before his feet left the ground. And then—

Was this what it felt like to fly? To defy gravity, to go up when the

forces all around him insisted that he stay down? Tim heard a surprised, delighted laugh bubble out of his mouth as the windows blurred past him. He thought maybe Nightwing laughed too, or maybe he actually said something, but it got lost in the wind past Tim's ears.

The rush was almost enough to make him forget what was going to happen at the other end of their short trip. *Almost.* Because the second they'd clamoured up over the parapet—which was easier than Tim was expecting—Nightwing unhooked the harness from himself but left it connected to Tim and hung onto it.

Like a leash, Tim realized with a sinking feeling. He couldn't get away, even if he had nowhere to go up here.

"So," Nightwing said, while Tim was still looking around the empty rooftop, wondering what he'd gotten himself into. "You're the shutterbug, huh?"

Tim's eyes landed back on Nightwing. "The what now?"

"The guy who's been sending us intel for more than a year?" Nightwing prompted.

Tim's stomach plummeted. It felt like it fell all the way back down to the street.

"We've been calling you Bug for short." Nightwing shrugged. "Gordon came up with the name."

"He did?" Tim said, then he caught himself. "I mean, I don't know what you're talking about."

Nightwing's mouth twitched like he wanted to smile. "Sure you don't. Just like I don't know that you're Timothy Drake."

Fuck, Tim thought, for the however-manyth time that night. "How?" he asked, because there was no point in denying it now.

"You've done a pretty good job covering your tracks," Nightwing explained. "Your last few drops were kinda sloppy, though, hope you don't mind me saying. The cop you handed pictures to in Bristol Central Square? He gave me a pretty good description. The next time, a traffic cam picked you up. Wasn't hard to make the ID after that."

Tim winced internally. He knew it. He should have been more careful. But the pictures of the arsonist and those guys casing the bank were

too important to slow-play it. And now...

“So now you and Batman are gonna bring me in?” he said miserably.

“What? No,” said Nightwing.

Tim’s head shot up. Nightwing’s eyes were confused behind his mask. That made two of them. “Why not?” Tim asked.

“Well, for one thing, you’ve been a really big help,” Nightwing told him. “Obviously, you’re an ally. We don’t make a habit of locking up our allies.”

“Oh,” said Tim faintly.

“But I am obligated to warn you,” Nightwing went on, before Tim could relax too much. “You’re in dangerous territory, Timothy. Those photos you sent to Gordon’s computer? They were a key piece of evidence that put one of Salvatore Maroni’s lieutenants behind bars.”

“I know,” said Tim, trying not to sound too proud.

He obviously failed— Nightwing’s mouth pressed into a thin line. “If anyone finds out who you are and what you know, you could be in serious trouble.”

Tim nodded without a word.

“Not to mention the risks you take just walking around after dark in this city,” Nightwing added. “You could get mugged, you could get attacked. Hell, you could fall off a roof.”

He shook the harness in his hand, jingling the clips for emphasis. “I’m careful,” Tim protested.

Nightwing assessed him with Dick’s eyes. “I know you are,” he said. “Still.”

“Still?” Tim repeated, watching Nightwing dig into one of his impossible pockets again. A moment later, he pulled out a small black device that looked like a key to a bike lock.

“This is an emergency beacon. You just slide this here,” he explained, swiping it with his thumb. The small silver key flattened into a silver button. “And then press it. To make it go away, do that in reverse, like this. Here, you try. Just don’t actually push the button, okay?”

Tim took the device and practised opening and closing it. “What happens when I push it?” he asked. “Does it make a sound, or—?”

“Not audible, no,” said Nightwing. “It sets off an alarm in the Batcave and transmits your coordinates, so we know exactly where to find you.”

Oh. Bat-*cave.* That made way more sense than *Batbase.*

Tim nodded, keeping his expression blank. Nightwing had said the word so casually, Tim doubted he even realized what he’d just given away.

“It’s only to be used in extreme circumstances,” Nightwing cautioned. “Don’t press it just because you want to chat.”

“I won’t,” Tim promised.

“Good,” said Nightwing. He looked at Tim a little longer, and Tim had to ask.

“You’re really not gonna get me in trouble?” When Nightwing sighed instead of answering, Tim added, “Or make me stop?”

“I’ll be honest, Timothy, I don’t think I could stop you even if I wanted to,” Nightwing answered. “But I’ll at least sleep a little easier knowing that you’ve got back-up if you need it.”

“Right,” said Tim, looking down at the emergency beacon again. “Batman will come for me?”

Nightwing hesitated, just long enough for Tim to notice and look up. “He’ll come,” Nightwing said. “He’ll... be a little confused, because I didn’t actually *tell* him I was planning to give you a beacon, but—”

“You— what?” Tim stammered. “He doesn’t know?”

“No,” said Nightwing admitted with a grimace. “I kinda didn’t tell him that I figured out who you are.”

Tim sat down abruptly. The rough surface of the roof made a scraping sound when it came into contact with the harness clips that were still around his legs.

“Whoa,” said Nightwing, dropping down as well. “Timothy, are you okay?”

Tim didn't answer. He'd meant— when he said Batman didn't know, he'd meant Batman didn't know that Nightwing had taken one of his beacons, not that— not that he didn't— *oh god.*

"He doesn't know who I am," he repeated through numb lips.

"Oh. Uh. No," said Nightwing awkwardly. "We don't always— um. Sometimes, we don't... talk?"

"I was sure," Tim whispered, only half-hearing Nightwing's fumbling phrases. "Are you— are you gonna tell him?"

Nightwing assessed him for a moment, then sighed again. "I wasn't planning on it."

Relief. Tim nodded. "Okay. Okay, thanks."

Nightwing's mouth was still twisted up with worry. "Are you alright, Timothy?"

"Yeah," Tim answered, and he pushed up to get to his feet. Nightwing got there first and extended a hand to help.

"A lot's happened tonight," he said. "You should get back to Wayne Manor before you crash completely. Mr. Wayne's probably freaking out that you're not home yet."

"I didn't want the cops to know who I was," Tim felt the need to explain as he pulled his phone out of his pocket. "I was worried they'd tell the papers or something."

"I'm sure Mr. Wayne appreciates that," Nightwing said. He paused. "But next time? Maybe don't try to bribe Sergeant Biala? He's one of the good ones, and Gotham doesn't have too many of those."

Tim's face went hot. He was grateful for the opportunity to look down at his phone and call Alfred.

That could have gone better, Nightwing thought, watching from a few metres away while Tim spoke to Alfred on the phone. *Could have gone worse, too.*

He'd been mostly improvising, but he had spent the last two weeks imagining this confrontation in quiet moments, wondering when it would happen and how it would it go. Turned out: sooner than he'd wanted; better than he'd feared; worse than he'd expected.

Giving him an emergency beacon? Good.

Not letting on that I know he knows who I am? Very good.

Revealing that Batman doesn't know about Bug? Less good.

He hadn't meant to say that. He'd planned to present a united front, like he and Batman were in on this together; that was usually the best strategy, regardless of whether or not it was true. But Tim's question had caught him off-guard. Nightwing had misunderstood and answered too honestly, and now it was too late to take it back. Given's Tim's reaction, the news came as a surprise, too, which was even worse. Nightwing really hoped that Tim wouldn't use Batman's ignorance to try a bolder escape plan at some point in the future.

(The rational part of his brain told him that this was yet another reason not to keep Bruce in the dark, but Dick had done a pretty good job of ignoring that rational part so far. No reason to start listening now.)

"Hang on," Tim said into the phone, and he raised his head, glancing around the roof. Nightwing moved, making himself easy to spot, and Tim found him immediately.

Not even a trace of concern or fear, Nightwing couldn't help but observe. Other than being surprised when he'd first arrived on the scene, Tim looked at him like he saw right through the mask.

Well, he *did.* It was like Dick was standing here in his t-shirt and jeans. It was a little unsettling.

"What's the nearest intersection?" Tim asked. "Shuter and East 21st?"

"Hm, closer to MacCauley, I think," Nightwing said, loud enough that Alfred would hear and recognize his voice.

He hadn't officially updated him yet, not wanting Alfred to notice the gap of time during which their rooftop conversation occurred. He trusted Tim would keep it a secret, and so long as Alfred didn't know, Bruce wouldn't know. And what Bruce didn't know wouldn't hurt Dick.

"Okay, see you then," said Tim, pulling the phone away from his ear. To Nightwing, he said, "My ride should be here in 15."

"Great," Nightwing replied with a nod.

“You can take off,” Tim told him, after a short hesitation. “Uh— once you take me back down to the street, obviously. I’m sure you have more important things to do.”

“Not right now I don’t,” said Nightwing, because it was more polite than saying, *No way in hell am I letting you out of my sight.*

Tim seemed to hear that, anyway. He shuffled his feet. “You don’t have to worry about me. I mean, it’s nice of you and all. But I can take care of myself. I’ve been doing this for a while.”

I know, Dick wanted to say, but Nightwing stayed silent. It was an old trick of Batman’s to keep people talking— a dirty trick that tended to work. People hated silence as a general rule and wanted to fill it.

Sure enough, Tim went on. “I don’t take stupid risks. I’m careful. I’m smart.”

“I don’t doubt your intelligence,” said Nightwing with complete honesty. “But you *do* take risks, Timothy.”

Tim reacted to hearing his full name the same way he had been all night— his jaw and shoulders tightened, his eyes dropped to the ground. Nightwing hated that he was causing this reaction, but it was distance: unless Tim told him otherwise, Nightwing had to pretend that he didn’t know Tim’s preferred name.

“Like tonight,” Nightwing added seriously. “You and your friends just happened to be caught in the middle of an armed robbery.”

It wasn’t exactly an accusation, but Tim caught his drift. He looked up, his forehead creased in confusion. “You think I went in there on purpose?”

Nightwing, again, didn’t speak. Tim huffed in indignation.

“You think, what, I saw a guy with a gun, and I followed him inside?” Tim asked, his voice rising in pitch and volume. “You think I told my friends to go in there because I wanted to take a picture of him robbing the store?”

“Did you?” Nightwing asked quietly.

“No!” Tim’s voice cracked. He cleared his throat, his cheeks going pink again. “I swear, it was a coincidence. Check my bag if you don’t believe me, Nightwing. I don’t even have my camera on me.”

“I’m not gonna check your bag,” Nightwing said. “I believe you.”

“Okay,” said Tim, nodding. “Okay, good. I would never put my friends in danger like that.”

But he was frowning— grimacing, more like. Nightwing tilted his head to the side—the masked equivalent of raising his eyebrows—and waited.

“Okay, Pat was with me on a roof one time, but that was also an accident,” Tim said quickly. “We were taking regular pictures, then they noticed the robbers, and I had my camera out anyway, so—”

“Was that the house in Kingston?” Nightwing interrupted.

Tim nodded again. “Yeah. Dr. Marcus’ house.”

Nightwing’s detective instincts sensed an opportunity. “What do you know about Dr. Marcus?”

Tim shrugged. “He works at Wayne Enterprises. Somebody broke into his lab and his house. There was a missing person’s report filed when he didn’t show up at the office, but then he came to Wayne Manor in the middle of the night. I don’t... know... why.”

Noticing how he trailed off, Nightwing asked, “What is it?”

“I think I just figured something out.” Tim shifted his weight, then met Nightwing’s eyes again— curious and fearless. “Did somebody try and kill Dr. Marcus?”

“Possibly,” Nightwing answered, cautious.

“He knew some people who died, though, right?” Tim pressed. “People at a different— no, a *rival* company— oh. LexCorp?”

Nightwing blinked, taken aback by Tim’s lightning-fast conclusions. “What do you know about that?”

“Not much,” Tim admitted. “Four people, they all worked on the same team at LexCorp. Deaths looked like accidents, mostly. Except for the one that got mugged.”

“Tiffany Close,” Nightwing murmured without really meaning to. Maybe it was the way his city had done her wrong, but he’d gotten a little too invested in her case in particular.

He noticed that Tim was watching him with wide eyes and made a conscious effort to slide his posture back into something more natural.

“Do you know anything else?” he asked. “Have you heard any rumours, or seen anything suspicious?”

Tim thought for a second— literally, one second. “I saw a LexCorp scientist talking to one of Falcone’s fixers in Metropolis.”

Nightwing nodded. “That information has already made its way to Batman,” he said carefully.

“Oh,” said Tim, clearly disappointed. Then he asked, “Is Dr. Marcus a suspect?”

Another thing he really shouldn’t know, Nightwing thought with a faint chill. Had he somehow gotten into Bruce’s files?

“He seemed really nice when he came to the manor,” Tim added wth a shrug. “I hope he’s not capable of something like that.”

Nightwing relaxed somewhat. “We’ve investigated him pretty thoroughly in the last few weeks and haven’t found evidence to suggest that. Unless you have any new intelligence that we should know?”

Tim shook his head. “No. Nothing.”

Nightwing nodded. “I’m not going to encourage you to start digging,” he said after a careful pause. “But if you happen to see something…”

“I’ll send it to Gordon,” Tim promised. His phone buzzed in his hand, and he checked it. “My ride’s a minute away.”

“Yep,” said Nightwing, re-focusing.

He stepped close enough to Tim to re-attach the harness. Like the first time, Tim’s body language didn’t tense up nearly as much as Nightwing had been expecting. It made him feel warm inside, Tim’s simple, unforced trust. It was like when they were practising his walkovers in the gym: Tim knew he was safe in Dick’s hands, and that humbled him, or something. Dick didn’t really want to dwell on it too much.

Going down was, as always, a lot more boring than going up. Tim still

grinned the whole way, though, and thanked him when they touched down on the pavement.

“I’ve gotta get me one of those,” he added, nodding towards the grapnel gun.

Absolutely not, Nightwing thought, in Batman’s stern voice— not that he was even tempted. An emergency beacon was one thing, but Bat-gadgets? Not without a ton of practice that Tim was never going to get.

“It takes a lot of training to use it safely,” Nightwing said as he unhooked Tim’s harness.

He stepped back. Tim was looking up into his eyes— challenging, unafraid. “Maybe you can teach me sometime.”

Nightwing blinked, and there was a different teenager in front of him. Same dark hair, same hopeful expression in his blue eyes. Tim’s grey sweatshirt was suddenly red, emblazoned with a letter *R,* and the black bag on his back lengthened, brightened. Yellow fabric running almost to the pavement.

Jason looked so much smaller in the costume than Dick could ever remember being.

“No,” Nightwing said shortly, just as headlights appeared at the end of the alley. It was Alfred’s Rolls Royce, but he read the front licence plate just to be sure.

Then, when Tim turned towards the car as well, Nightwing pulled another one of Batman’s signature tricks and disappeared.

He watched from the roof. Tim spun back, and his mouth fell open. But he couldn’t look long. Alfred was stepping out of the car and hurrying towards him. He placed his hands on Tim’s shoulders, and Nightwing knew what he was saying, even without sound, even too far away to read his lips.

Master Tim, are you alright?

A nod. *I’m fine, Alfred.*

A look towards the empty end of the alley, then a tug. *Let’s go home, my dear boy.*

With another flash of headlights, they were gone, leaving Nightwing on a rooftop with only a ghost for company.

Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Bruce doesn't like being kept in the dark.

So, he was not asking Dick about his presence in Gotham, and he was not asking Tim about his close call on Friday night, and he was not asking Alfred about when either of those situations might change.

However. None of that precluded him from looking into the robbery himself. Which was why, ten minutes after promising Alfred in the kitchen that he'd be patient, he had the Batcomputer running a program that would hack into the shoe store's security system and access its surveillance footage.

The end of September was fast approaching. *Truly,* Alfred thought, taking in the changing leaves outside the terrace door, *the older one gets, the faster time seems to move.* It was profoundly unfair, but with nothing to be done about it, all he could do was focus on the now—on the moments that led from one day to another to another.

Like this moment, currently reflected in the glass door before him. This moment, in which his otherwise remarkably capable boy wrestled, like a tragic hero doomed to fail, with his greatest foe: talking to one of his sons.

"Tim, I— I've given it a lot of thought. Your— I mean, our— I mean, *the* situation. With you living here."

It was far from an auspicious start. Alfred half-turned and caught sight of Tim's expression as it shifted into one of concern. Thankfully, Bruce noticed at once.

"I want you to stay," he said quickly. "Assuming you do too, of course."

He paused, waiting for— Alfred wasn't sure what. A contradiction? Confirmation? But Tim didn't fill the silence. Bruce bravely cleared his throat and carried on.

"Wayne Enterprises has an annual event every fall, the last weekend of September," he said, and Alfred, his face turned away, winced. "The Garden Party. I don't know if you ever— your parents have been

invited in the past, but maybe you didn't— uh. Anyway."

Alfred turned around. Tim's eyes were narrowed, his mouth slightly agape. He seemed truly baffled.

He wasn't the only one. Alfred caught Bruce's eye and raised a questioning eyebrow. Bruce responded with a minute shake of his head, and Alfred reluctantly nodded before looking away again. If Bruce was determined to keep digging this hole, perhaps the best thing he could do was stay out of the path of shovelfuls of dirt.

"My point is, it's a pretty public event," said Bruce. "Not like a charity ball or a gala— there won't be any press, and it's invite-only, for our staff, clients, and collaborators, but still. A lot of people will be there — *here,* actually. In the— well. In the garden."

"Makes sense," Tim granted, after a beat of silence.

"So, I was wondering if you— if you thought you would like to attend," Bruce carried on in a rush. "But then I thought, if you do— well, actually, my publicist thought that if you did attend, then it might be best to—"

"Oh," Tim interrupted.

Alfred smiled. *Smart lad.*

"It wouldn't be anything— we wouldn't have to give a lot of details," Bruce explained. "Just a simple press release. More so for the company and our clients, letting them know that, uh—"

"That you're not holding the heir to Drake Industries hostage?"

Bruce flinched—an exceptionally rare sight—and finally looked to Alfred for rescue. Alfred swooped in at once, physically laying a hand on Tim's arm.

"You are of much more value than your ties to your family's business, or even their name," Alfred told him firmly. "I believe what Master Bruce is suggesting is making a public statement in order to address basic questions all at once, therefore offering you some protection against prying eyes and nosy questions should you wish to attend the party."

"Yes," said Bruce with obvious relief and gratitude. "That is exactly what I'm suggesting."

Slowly and silently, Tim nodded. Alfred sent him a smile and pulled his hand away, waiting for him to speak. But—

“To be clear,” Bruce charged ahead, making Alfred purse his lips, “you don’t have to attend the party if you don’t want to. Nobody has to know you’re even here. The guests will be in the public wing of the manor and outdoors. It would be perfectly acceptable for you to stay in the family wing all night and just do your own thing.”

“However, we will be only a phone call or text message away, should you need us,” Alfred added.

“Oh,” Tim said again. “Oh, you’ll be— Alfred, you’re attending the party?”

“Alfred likes to oversee the caterers himself,” Bruce explained. He leaned in with a chagrined smile that was only half-exaggerated. “He’s also my moral support. He’s been at every soirée at Wayne Manor for as long as I can remember. Honestly, I’m not sure I could do it without him.”

“You’d manage, Master Bruce,” said Alfred, downplaying how touched he was by the words.

Tim, meanwhile, was looking again at Bruce, a question on his lips. To his credit, Bruce stayed silent and let him ask it in his own time.

“Would you,” he began, then started over. “If I don’t go to the party, would you still want to say something... about me?”

“Yes,” said Bruce clearly, with direct eye contact, leaving no room for doubt. “There’d be no hurry to do so, though. With the party...” He trailed off with a frown. “This isn’t— I don’t want to put any pressure on you, Tim. Not to attend the party, or to be visibly linked to me in any way. If you’re not ready for that yet— if you’re *never* ready for that, that’s okay.”

Tim stared a moment longer. “Can I think about it?”

“Absolutely.” Bruce placed a hand on Tim’s shoulder, offering. Tim didn’t move much—he didn’t initiate or seek physical contact, as a general rule—but he did lean ever so slightly into the touch. Bruce noticed this and kept his hand where it was.

“Okay,” Tim said, and that was that.

Bruce pulled back, Tim picked up his phone, and Alfred—as a means of hiding his deep sigh of relief—asked him if he had any towels in his room that needed washing.

“Oh, yeah, actually,” he answered, sliding down off the stool. “I’ll go grab them for you.”

“I’ll meet you in the laundry room momentarily,” said Alfred.

“‘Kay.”

“Bring your bathroom hand towels, too, please,” Alfred added, raising his voice as Tim left the kitchen.

“Yep,” said Tim over his shoulder.

“Good lad,” called Alfred, and he caught the tail end of Tim’s smile as he turned away again. “I needn’t have reminded him,” he added to Bruce. “He always fetches them, anyway.”

“He’s used to doing his own laundry and getting enough to fill a load,” Bruce agreed. He breathed out and looked to the ceiling. “Be honest, Al. How badly did I just fuck that up?”

Alfred raised his eyebrows, and Bruce, rolling his eyes, reached for his wallet. “Nine dollars, please,” said Alfred.

“Nine?”

“Yours, plus one for each of the boys while you were away.”

Bruce frowned, but he handed Alfred a ten-dollar bill. “I thought the point of the jar was to deter the kids from swearing. What good does it do if I bail them out?”

“There were circumstances,” Alfred replied. He unscrewed the lid of the jar and pulled out a single. Bruce waved a hand.

“Keep the change,” he said.

“Damn generous of you, sir,” said Alfred, and he put the single back.

Bruce stared, than snorted. Alfred grinned as well. Bruce exhaled and shook his head.

“You didn’t answer my question,” he said after a moment.

“You’re doing fine, Master Bruce,” Alfred assured him. “It was rather an awkward topic of conversation to begin with.”

“I’ll say,” Bruce agreed. He paused, then frowned. “Circumstances,” he repeated. “I assume you mean the shoe store.”

“Yes,” said Alfred, his shoulders tensing. He hoped Bruce wouldn’t notice, but it was futile. Bruce noticed everything.

When Alfred didn’t go on, Bruce crossed his arms and tapped his index finger against his bicep. “You really think he’ll tell me on his own?”

“Patience, Master Bruce,” said Alfred— a quiet plea. “He was frightened. He’s not ready for you to know that yet.”

Bruce made a petulant face that Alfred recognized from decades past. “Does he think I’d be disappointed in him or something?”

“I assure you, I do not know,” said Alfred, but Bruce went on.

“Because I wouldn’t be. Anybody would be frightened in a situation like that. The man had a *gun.”*

“I know,” Alfred tried again to interrupt.

“Maybe his parents told him he wasn’t allowed to be scared? Or maybe—”

Alfred sighed rather loudly, which finally shook Bruce out of his speculations. “Until he says something, we can only guess,” Alfred reminded him.

Bruce assessed him for a moment. “He really didn’t tell you anything?”

“Other than, ‘please don’t tell Bruce’?” At this, Bruce grimaced. “Just the basic facts.” Alfred lowered his voice. “I learned the details from Master Dick.”

Bruce nodded, though he still looked unhappy.

Alfred patted him on the arm, then headed out the kitchen door towards the laundry room. He could hear Tim coming down the stairs already, his arms full of towels to wash. Knowing Tim, there’d be a few pairs of white socks, too, because they were dirty anyway and did best in hot water.

Bruce knew Alfred was right. He knew—or maybe he just hoped very strongly—that it was just a matter of time before Tim told him about the shoe store. He had to be patient. It had only been four days since it happened, and only two days since Bruce returned from his trip to outer space with the Justice League.

It was his least favourite kind of mission— the diplomatic kind best left to Clark. But in this case one of the alien species they were working with had an old grudge against Krypton. They were warriors, though, so Diana would have been the best second choice, but Themiscyra needed her, and since *someone* needed to go along and make sure Hal didn't blow the peace talks, Bruce was it. They brokered the treaty with only a few tense moments, but it was still the kind of mission that made Bruce's teeth itch. The worst part was that he got home too late on Monday evening to patrol, leaving him both pent-up *and* exhausted.

Then this morning, after taking Tim to Pat's so they could walk to school together as usual, Alfred sat him down in the kitchen with a cup of his favourite coffee and dropped the bomb: on Friday night, Tim and his friends had witnessed an armed robbery. Nightwing had been dispatched after the fact to ease Tim out of the crime scene with very few questions asked.

Despite Alfred's protests that it wasn't even 9:00 in the morning, Bruce called Dick at once. (Dick grunted at him to read his report on the computer and then started snoring again when Bruce tried to ask a follow-up question.) So he took his coffee downstairs and did just that, all the while ignoring Alfred's *I-told-you-so* eyebrow.

The criminals—the man with the shotgun, the store owner who'd arranged the robbery for the insurance money, and an employee who was complicit in the whole thing—were already behind bars, awaiting trial. Nightwing hadn't brought them in himself, having arrived after the police, but he'd kept a close eye on the officers putting together the case, making sure nothing was missed.

He'd kept a close eye on Gotham City overall, actually, and Bruce really was grateful, as he told him when he called him back at a much more polite hour that afternoon. He also appreciated that Dick had stayed at the manor the rest of the weekend, keeping Tim company, even though that wasn't part of the original plan.

Bruce didn't ask if he'd had another reason to stick around. Dick had been coming into town a lot lately without telling him, staying at

various safehouses around the city. Bruce was trying not to worry about that, reminding himself that Dick had his own life, his own friends, his own incentives to be here. Bruce's leading hypothesis was that, for all his talk of pursuing something with the diener at the Blüdhaven County Coroner's office, he was actually trying to start things up with Barbara Gordon again. Absence made the heart grow fond, after all— or so Bruce had been told. (He knew better than to outright ask Dick about his love life, though. There was no way that conversation would go well.)

So, he was not asking Dick about his presence in Gotham, and he was not asking Tim about his close call on Friday night, and he was not asking Alfred about when either of those situations might change, because Alfred's answer—*just be patient*—would no doubt stay the same.

However. None of that precluded him from looking into the robbery himself. Which was why, ten minutes after promising Alfred in the kitchen that he'd be patient, he had the Batcomputer running a program that would hack into the shoe store's security system and access its surveillance footage, if it had any. Bruce was doubtful; given that it was an inside job, he assumed the owner would have deactivated the cameras, but it was still worth a shot.

While that chugged away in the background, he started re-reading the police reports, but he soon got distracted. There were five eyewitness statements— four named, one anonymous. Bruce knew from what Alfred and Dick had told him that Tim was the John Doe. Apparently, he'd told Nightwing that he didn't want the cops knowing he was connected to Bruce Wayne. Dick had said he was afraid the story would get out to the tabloids.

It broke Bruce's heart a little to hear that—that Tim was so worried about embarrassing him, or causing harm to Bruce's reputation—even if he understood where it came from. He knew the kind of weight that Tim's parents gave to proper appearances. Bruce had seen firsthand what happened if anyone associated Jack or his company with even the faintest whiff of scandal, which was hard to guarantee when you set up shop in a dirty place like Gotham. That wasn't to say Jack had a strict moral code, of course, but he was a pro at distancing DI from the usual suspects that might drag a fine, upstanding businessman like him down into the muck. And if some shady connection did come to light, Jack would mobilize his army of PR professionals to spin it just right and make him look like the hero.

Janet was cut from the same cloth. Bruce doubted Tim could remember—he couldn't have been much older than two at the time—but the press once discovered that one of his nannies had earned a little extra money working at a strip club while she was in college. She was fired immediately, of course, and Janet sued the agency less than a day later. She won, too, and she told that story at parties for years.

Tim was—ironically? fittingly?—the only scandal they hadn't seen coming. Since the news broke that their son was in the custody of the state, Jack and Janet had been remarkably quiet, with Drake Industries only issuing a short statement requesting privacy while the family went through this difficult time. Bruce, going through his own difficult time, hadn't really noticed, but the Drakes stopped attending parties or galas, staying out of sight as DI struggled to recover in the market.

Dick's report told him that Tim was arguing with the cop about getting a ride home when Nightwing arrived on the scene. Was Tim worried that the same thing would happen to Wayne Enterprises if someone saw him get out of a cruiser in front of Wayne Manor? Or was he concerned that someone would recognize him as the son of the Drakes, and his being associated—even remotely, even innocently—with a crime would cause more harm to his parents? By refusing to tell the police his name and where he lived, who was Tim trying to protect? The Drakes, or Bruce Wayne?

Bruce didn't let himself think too much about what he wanted the answer to that question to be. Instead, he'd made an appointment with his publicist. She already knew, of course, that he was fostering another child, but she didn't know until today who it was. When Bruce told her, she'd let out a long, slow breath before diving into what she did best— what he paid her so well to do. By the time their ninety minutes were up, she had four different possible strategies. Letting the story out right before the Garden Party was the simplest and, in Bruce's opinion, the best, so he'd initiated the 'rather awkward' conversation with Tim after dinner tonight.

He'd been meaning to talk to Tim about the Garden Party for a while now anyway, but he'd been waiting for the right time, mindful of how poorly it had gone when he'd brought it up to Dick last month. The shoe store incident and the anonymous eyewitness report seemed like a sign that it was time. He'd hoped— well, to be honest, he wasn't sure what exactly he'd hoped for. He didn't expect that Tim would jump at the opportunity to make some kind of debut like a southern belle. But, he'd thought, *maybe.* Maybe obliquely mentioning a

solution to the problem at the root of Tim's argument with the police on Friday night would encourage him to open up and actually tell Bruce about what happened.

Unfortunately, he was wrong. Or, maybe he was just not right yet. Alfred had told him to be patient, and Alfred was usually right. Tim had said he wanted to think about it before giving an answer. Hopefully, he meant that. But even if he didn't, Bruce now had to pretend he didn't know a thing about what happened on Friday night, even though it was killing him to think of Tim having been through that traumatic scenario—so close to a threat, so close *to a gun*—and being more afraid of what would happen to the adults in his life if anyone found out.

The Batcomputer chirped, pulling Bruce out of his thoughts. He directed his attention to the screen and opened the hacking program. It had done its job, finding remote logs of the store's security system and some camera footage. While the files downloaded, Bruce skimmed the system logs for anomalies. He found one almost immediately: about 20 minutes before Pat's 9-1-1 call, one of the store's employees muted the system alerts locally. The system itself wasn't deactivated; the cameras and sensors stayed on. This was inconvertible evidence of an inside job. Unfortunately, nobody needed this evidence, as the employee had already confessed.

Bruce saved the log for his own records (just in case), then opened the video files.

Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Bruce watches the footage from the shoe store robbery.

Bruce skipped the footage back again and watched Tim somehow read the intention in the robber's posture and pull a civilian out of harm's way the way that he or Dick or Jason might have.

"It is impressive, isn't it," he murmured without really meaning to.

Chapter Notes

Picking up right where we left off last time. This used to be one chapter, but it was kind of a lot.

There were seven camera feeds for the store. Two were external, one over the front door and one over the back. Five cameras covered the interior: one behind the cashier's counter, showing most of the front of the store; one for each of the three narrow, overstuffed aisles; and one covering the back-of-house area. Bruce clicked along the timeline of this one first, finding the moment when a young, skinny employee entered a code into the security panel. The timestamp matched with the log that Bruce had already found, which showed the security system's alerts were muted— no mystery there.

Bruce moved the exterior camera footage to this timestamp, then scrolled ahead a few minutes at a time, stopping whenever a group of pedestrians came into view in front of the store. The fourth such group was Tim and his friends. He synched the camera feeds, then got to his feet and stepped back to take in the entire scene at once, using a voice command to commence playback.

First, in the upper left monitor: the group entered the frame. Three of the teenagers huddled in front of the store window. Two others—Tim and a light-haired boy—stopped a few steps past the window and doubled back. The group talked for a moment. They headed inside.

Bruce tracked their movement from the camera behind the cash register. The group split up again, and Tim ended up on his own near the door marked 'Employees Only,' which no doubt led to the back-of-house area. Here, Bruce paused playback to confirm something he suspected: the far corner of the store in the rearmost aisle was a blind

spot with no camera coverage. He looked over all the rest of the angles and realized he could not see the skinny employee he'd seen earlier, nor the owner of the store who had also been arrested at the scene. That could only mean that they were hanging out in that blind spot— just one shelf and a few feet away from Tim.

With a frown, Bruce started playback again. He watched Tim wander along the aisle, touching a few shoe boxes as he passed, before he stopped. His arm dropped to his side and he raised his head. Cocked it back and to the left.

Listening, Bruce realized. *What was he hearing?*

Movement on the upper left monitor caught Bruce's eye. A man was standing on the sidewalk outside the store, his back to the camera. He seemed to be looking at his watch as a couple strolled by hand-in-hand. Once they were past him, he pulled a piece of black fabric out of his left pocket. He yanked the ski mask over his face and shook his right arm. He held it rather stiffly at his side as he walked towards the door, and Bruce knew he had a long-barrelled gun up his sleeve.

The man opened the door left-handedly and walked inside, appearing in the top centre monitor. He let the door close behind him, and stood with his feet firmly planted on the hardwood floor for a handful of seconds. Then he walked forward—calmly, smoothly—towards the cash register.

On the upper right screen, Tim was moving. He leaned forward into a half-crouch, peering through the shelves while trying to keep himself out of sight. It worked. The masked man passed right by the end of Tim's aisle, none the wiser. The shotgun came out of his sleeve as he neared the counter. He cocked it.

On the screen beside him, Tim turned into a statue, still miraculously out of sight. Bruce watched the robber close the distance to the counter. When he got there and rang the bell, Bruce glanced to the right and noticed Tim was gone.

He paused the footage and went back ten seconds. He didn't take his eyes away from Tim this time. Tim was frozen. Three seconds passed. Then five. Then he disappeared— he ducked low, out of the camera's field of vision. He was off-screen for about six seconds before popping up in the lower edge of the screen below— the angle that showed the aisle next to his, where Pat and the only girl of their group were looking at high heels.

Still low to the ground, Tim got his friends' attention, beckoning them to the end of the aisle away from the cash register. He pointed at Pat sharply. The footage had no audio, but Bruce could tell he said something. It took Pat a long moment to react, to pull their phone out of their pocket and start tapping on the screen. Tim ducked down and swung around the next corner while Pat pressed the phone to their ear.

Meanwhile, one aisle and one screen over, the light-haired boy and the tall lad—Sebastian, Bruce thought, having been introduced briefly when he picked Tim up from Pat's Labour Day party—had noticed the robbery in progress. They were staring, but the light-haired boy turned when Tim appeared behind them. He crouched as well and moved back towards Tim, but Sebastian seemed fixated on the scene at the counter. Tim edged closer, daring to stand up in order to reach out, but before he could grab Sebastian—

Bruce knew what was about to happen, his mind's eye filling in the details a split-second before they played out onscreen.

Shift the weight, left foot to right.

Head comes up and back.

Pivot on the back foot, swing the arm.

Steady the gun with left hand on the forend.

Right forearm flexes with the movement of the index finger.

People die.

Or— people would have. Bruce stopped and skipped back again, watching the other angle this time. Tim was fast—*so* fast—pulling Sebastian down. They landed in a heap of tangled limbs less than a second before the shoe boxes on the shelf behind them exploded and fell.

It was impossible to tell from the footage how close a call it'd been, but ultimately, it didn't matter. The call was close enough, Bruce thought, aware of his quick breathing, his sweaty palms. That was a *gun,* and that was his—

Bruce caught himself, stopped the word that sprang to mind and changed it for another, one that had become true regardless of whether or not there was any official paperwork.

Tim was *family*. And someone had *shot at him*.

Dick and Alfred hadn't said a word about this. Did they even know? Alfred had said there was a gunshot on the 9-1-1 recording, and that Tim had been frightened. Dick had said that he'd seemed shaken up, but if Tim had told either of them exactly what had happened in the shoe store, they didn't share that with Bruce. And they would have. Bruce was reasonably sure that they would have, regardless of any promises they'd made to Tim to keep this from him.

Bruce stared at the footage, frozen on a frame of Tim and Sebastian on the ground. The light-haired boy crouched at the other end of the same aisle. Even from a distance, Bruce could tell his eyes were wide with horror. In the next aisle, Pat spoke into the phone, their back to the scene at the counter. The girl had her hands over her mouth in a tableau of tear-stricken terror.

Bruce closed his eyes to the scene. *He should have been there.* A hundred scenes like this played out in Gotham every night. He couldn't stop them all. But he should have been there. His—*these*—kids shouldn't have had to go through something like this. Maybe—hopefully—one day they wouldn't have to. Maybe—hopefully—he could turn the tide. Maybe—hopefully—his mission was making a difference, one night, one crime at a time.

He re-opened his eyes, went back to the keyboard. He started the playback again, watching the aftermath of the shot, the tense moment between the robber and the store staff. But he didn't really see it. Instead, he was watching Tim slowly get to his feet and pull Sebastian gently up with him. For a frightening moment, Bruce feared they were hurt, but a second later he understood: they were moving slow and staying low to avoid being seen.

Thankfully, the robber wasn't looking. He and the store employees seemed to be arguing. The robber gestured wildly with the gun—his finger not on the trigger anymore, Bruce was relieved to see—and the older employee raised his hands in surrender, obviously trying to keep him calm.

On the exterior cameras, the police were pulling up. Uniformed officers converged on the front and rear entrances. A moment later, they entered via the front. Bruce didn't relax until the robber's weapon was out of his hands and handcuffs were on his wrists. Tim didn't seem to, either, standing still but tense beside Sebastian, his weight on the balls of his feet like he might be called upon to spring

into action again. When the robber was subdued, the police approached and spoke to the group of teenagers.

Tim's shoulders slumped, and he moved to the end of the aisle to sit down on the small, cushioned stool by the floor-level mirrors. Bruce looked back to the camera behind the counter and watched Tim sit, perfectly still. Bruce sighed, recognizing even through the screen the signs of a dissociative episode. His chest ached, but he did not look away.

Six minutes—*six. Minutes!*—later, a police officer noticed and crouched down to Tim's eye level. They spoke for a moment, then the cop led him out the front door. The rest of his friends had been shepherded away already by that point, and the store was empty except for police.

Bruce inhaled deeply, sat down at the desk, and reached for the keyboard. He skipped back to the shot, and played it again, this time at half-speed. The robber was fast; Tim was somehow faster. Bruce watched it over and over, wishing for another angle, wondering if he could sneak under the crime scene tape later tonight and get a look at it firsthand. Or maybe he could run some models and calculate the trajectory, so Tim—

He stopped, realizing what he was doing, what the next step was in this process. It was all so painfully familiar.

Account. Analyze. Adapt.

He could hear the three-word mantra as clearly as if someone in the room had spoken it aloud. The same someone who'd said it a hundred times or more. When he was getting impatient, Bruce would ask him to repeat it. He'd roll his eyes, but Jason would say it.

Share my account of what happened.

Analyze how and why it happened.

Adapt my techniques in case it happens again.

They used this system for everything— from an awkward encounter with a civilian to a hostage situation with Mr. Freeze. When he got frustrated learning a new move. When a fight didn't go his way. But there were good reasons for using it, too: when he tried compassion and curiosity instead of violence to confront a kid no older than himself trying to buy a handgun on a street corner. When he walked a

woman home because she was scared of the street but more scared of Batman. It was a good system, and it worked every time.

Well. Except for the last time.

Bruce blew out a shaky breath. Resting his elbows on the desk, he ran his fingers back through his hair and closed his eyes. There'd be no more accounts, no more analysis, no more adaptation. Bruce would never get Jason's account of his last mission. He'd never get to analyze it with him, or go over the incident step-by-step. There'd be no adapted training regimen or increased practice time with certain gadgets or styles of combat. Robin wouldn't get the opportunity to learn from his mistakes—from Batman's mistakes—ever again.

Alfred found him like this a few minutes later. Bruce had heard his footsteps coming down the stairs, but he couldn't bring himself to move. He heard a faint *tsk,* then hard-soled shoes growing closer on the stone floor. When long seconds had passed with Alfred saying nothing, Bruce lowered his hands and raised his head.

"Is this...?" Alfred started to ask.

"Security footage from the shoe store? Yes," said Bruce. Looking at the screen now, he noticed that he'd stopped it on a frame of the robber being arrested. Better than the gunshot, he supposed.

"You just couldn't help yourself, could you?" said Alfred with a sigh that was half-exasperated, half-fond.

"Apparently not," Bruce replied.

Alfred obviously heard something in his voice—something that Bruce didn't intend to reveal—because he asked, "What is it?"

Bruce sighed and skipped back along the video's timeline. "Take a look at this."

Alfred frowned but came closer to the screen. He watched Tim quietly alert three of his four friends to the danger, prompting all of them to crouch and prompting Pat to dial 9-1-1.

"My word," Alfred murmured, then he gasped a second later when the robber fired his shotgun in Tim and Sebastian's direction.

"You didn't know about this," Bruce concluded, mostly to himself.

“I knew there was a gunshot, because I heard the 9-1-1 audio,” said Alfred. “I had no idea it was such a close call.”

Bruce didn’t respond, tense and waiting, until—

“I would have told you if I did,” Alfred added.

Bruce nodded, more relieved than he wanted to let on.

“He did well,” Alfred added, but he *tsk*ed again when Tim wandered to the stool and sank down upon it. “Poor lad.”

Bruce let the silence hang for a moment, watching Tim dissociate onscreen. “I don’t know what to do here,” he confessed eventually.

Alfred exhaled in that way that meant he had something to say, and he suspected that Bruce wouldn’t like hearing it. Bruce waited for him to get the words out.

“I wish to make a suggestion, and I do hope you’ll hear me out before jumping down my throat.”

“No,” said Bruce, because he could guess where this was going.

“Good show, well done,” Alfred muttered. He moved so he stood between Bruce and the monitors, his arms crossed and his lips pressed into a thin line. “My suggestion is that you train him—”

“No,” Bruce repeated.

“—in *civilian* self-defence,” Alfred carried on firmly, derailing Bruce’s lecture before he could get it started. “He clearly has good instincts, and it will put your mind at ease to know he’ll be able to protect himself should he find himself in a situation like this again.”

Bruce stared, his protests lying dead in his throat.

“Think about it, sir,” Alfred added. “He’s the only one of your— er. He’s not like Dick or Jason.”

Bruce heard the word Alfred almost said, the word he’d thought earlier before catching himself, and something moved inside his chest. He had to take a deep breath and re-focus.

Alfred was right, of course. Bruce had started teaching Dick to fight almost as soon as he got here— Dick was an angry kid, used to intense daily physical activity, and he’d needed an outlet long before Robin

was even a thing. Meanwhile, Jason had learned on his own. All Bruce had had to do was hone his technique, teach him to fight smarter and safer. But Tim....

What experience did Tim have? He was a bookish kid with rich parents who'd gone to private school most of his life. Aside from taking a karate or judo class at some point, he likely didn't even know how to protect himself if someone threatened him.

No, that wasn't entirely fair, Bruce amended a second later. Tim knew how to stay out of sight and call for help. That wasn't nothing. On Friday night, that had been enough. But what about the next time? And there might be a next time, as much as Bruce hated to think about it. He couldn't stop all crime, he couldn't be everywhere at once, and he couldn't protect Tim every single minute. Tim was a teenager, and he was independent. He was going to go places on his own, and things were going to happen.

"It's a good idea," Bruce was forced to admit, "except for one problem."

"Which is?"

"He doesn't know what I can do. Nobody does. Nobody from Bruce Wayne's world, anyway. How could Bruce Wayne, foster parent, start teaching him self-defence?"

"Rich men have strange hobbies," Alfred replied, not seeming at all bothered. "And you do have a reputation for high-risk extracurriculars. Would it be so unusual to think that a man who enjoys waterskiing might also partake in some mixed martial arts in his spare time?"

"I suppose not," said Bruce with a frown. He reached forward, and Alfred moved, letting him access the keyboard. He skipped the footage back again and watched Tim somehow read the intention in the robber's posture and pull a civilian out of harm's way the way that he or Dick or Jason might have.

"It is impressive, isn't it," he murmured without really meaning to.

"It's extraordinary," Alfred agreed, placing a hand on Bruce's shoulder. "The way these children keep finding their way to you... it's remarkable."

"It's luck," Bruce countered, a pang in his chest. "But whether good or

bad luck, I'm not sure."

Alfred sighed and took his hand away. "Brood if you must, sir," he said, "but I know which I choose to believe."

Bruce didn't respond, watching the footage play again. After a moment, Alfred took a step back towards the exit.

"It's after ten," he announced. "If you wish to bid Master Tim goodnight, you'd best come upstairs."

"Yes," said Bruce, blinking and pushing himself forcibly away from the desk.

He followed Alfred into the elevator, and they rode up in comfortable silence. They emerged into the empty study a moment later and walked down the hall, parting ways at the top of the stairs. Alfred headed down, while Bruce turned towards the bedroom hallway, where he spotted Tim, headphones over his ears, ducking into his bedroom, likely returning from the bathroom across the hall. He didn't glance in Bruce's direction. Not wanting to startle him, Bruce slowed his pace and waited until he'd closed his door before continuing on to his own room. He left the door open while he went to the dresser and removed his watch. He loosened the collar of his shirt as well before returning to the hall and going to Tim's door.

"Just a sec," Tim called in response to Bruce's knock.

When he opened the door a moment later, he was in his pyjamas. The headphones were gone, but his black hair was tousled in the shape of them. Bruce had asked, just before school started, if he wanted to get his hair cut, but Tim's response had been a noncommittal shrug and an *If you think I should,* which had become Bruce's least favourite answer to any question.

"What's up?" said Tim.

"Ready for bed?" Bruce asked. It wasn't what he meant to say.

Tim gave him the kind of look that such an obvious question would warrant, though his face was slightly flushed, like the question was embarrassing in some way. Maybe it was. Maybe none of his friends his age had a strict bedtime.

"Pretty much. It's almost 10:30, so…" Tim trailed off with a shrug that asked what Bruce really wanted.

But Bruce wasn't really sure. He stalled. "Mind if I come in for a minute?"

"Um, okay."

Tim stepped aside, and Bruce entered. Tim followed, standing awkwardly near the bed. "Look, about earlier," he began, "I didn't mean to, like, hurt your feelings about not wanting to go public about living here."

"I know," said Bruce kindly. "And don't worry, you didn't. I understand that it's complicated, and I meant what I said. Take as much time as you need to decide."

"Okay. Thanks," Tim added, but when Bruce gestured that they should sit, his expression became even more uncertain. He sank onto the end of his bed regardless, and Bruce settled into the chair at Tim's desk, swivelling it to face him. He smiled, hoping that Tim would know he wasn't in any trouble, that things were okay.

"I just," he started, then breathed out. "I hope you know that you can tell me anything, Tim," he said. The words weren't perfect—Alfred wasn't there—but it was a start.

Tim's eyebrows drew together. "Anything, like...?"

"Anything, like anything," Bruce reiterated. "Anything about school, or your friends, or— what was that game club that Sebastian wanted you to join?"

"Wizards and Warriors," Tim answered with a faint smile.

"Right," said Bruce. "You think you're going to?"

"I don't know," Tim said, frowning towards the window. "I know I'm a nerd, but that's bit much even for me."

Bruce chuckled. "Well, I won't judge you either way," he said honestly. He swallowed hard and pressed on. "Because I care about you, Tim, and I want you to be happy and— and safe."

He watched Tim think about this for a second. Then Tim's cheeks went pink, and his eyes widened. Bruce mentally reviewed what he'd just said and realized what it sounded like— what topic would warrant this kind of talk from a father to his son. His own face started to heat up, but he didn't let himself make an excuse to leave the

conversation, and he *didn't* call for Alfred to rescue him.

"Just— just keep that in mind, okay?" he concluded weakly.

"I will," said Tim, not looking at him. "If I— uh. Yeah."

Bruce waited a few seconds, wondering if Tim was going to go on. When he didn't, Bruce stood and went to Tim, placing a hand on his shoulder just as Alfred had for him earlier. He squeezed, and smiled down when Tim looked up.

"I'm proud of you," he said— *that* was what he'd meant to say when he first knocked on Tim's door. The words, like they knew they were late, rushed out too fast. Maybe Tim didn't even understand them, but what mattered was that Bruce said them anyway.

Tim did understand, though. Bruce could tell by the way his throat moved as he swallowed, by how fast he blinked before he looked away again.

"Thanks," he said to the empty computer chair.

Bruce smiled and waited a moment longer, but Tim didn't blurt out a spontaneous explanation— not about what happened at the shoe store, or his romantic interests, or even Wizards and Warriors. So Bruce just squeezed his shoulder again and let go.

"Goodnight," he said, heading for the door.

"Goodnight," Tim repeated.

Bruce shut the door quietly behind him. He stood in the hall and breathed, slowly and deeply, just for a moment, before he went back down to the Cave.

He had a training regimen to plan.

Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Clark Kent attends the Wayne Enterprises Annual Garden Party.

Clark watched the guests to make sure no one was about to take advantage of the crowd's distraction to go after AJ. But that wasn't all he was doing. He was also looking for someone else— Bruce had told him about the new kid last week, mentioning that he might be attending tonight and confessing that his presence was another reason he wanted Clark to be a second set of eyes at the party. Clark was disappointed when he didn't spot him; he'd been eager to meet this kid-who-wasn't-Robin.

Chapter Notes

Welcome to the first Garden Party chapter!

It is sheer good luck that my Clark Kent POV chapter gets released in the same month as the new Superman movie. It is sheer bad luck that I have not made it out to see said Superman movie yet.

Resplendent, Clark thought as he passed under the broad floral arch. *Like splendid, but brighter, shining. Seventeenth-century, from the Latin* splendere, *to shine. With the re- prefix, to shine back, to reflect beauty.* That was the word he needed, the word he'd use if he were to write about this.

The sun was low in the sky, bathing everything in warm orange. The flowers over his head—sunflowers, asters, dahlias, mums, and roses, plus others that he couldn't name—drank in the light and sent it back out into the world *(resplendere)* in vibrant reds, deep golden yellows, rich umbers, and earthy greens. Even as the shadows lengthened and the wind brought traces of an autumn chill, the sun, in gifting these flowers their hue, announced that it was still summer for a little bit longer.

"Ope, sorry, excuse me," he said, when the couple he'd been pretending not to hear behind him passed by very close to him on the path under the floral arch.

The couple pretended not to hear him, too, not even giving him so

much as a distracted smile as they went around him. *Gothamites,* Clark thought, shaking his head.

“Not in Kansas anymore, are you?” Bruce’s wry voice said into his ear like he’d read Clark’s mind.

Clark scanned the area surreptitiously and spotted each of the cameras. The closest was almost entirely concealed by a climbing rose bush on the exterior wall just a few dozen feet away from him. Clark looked directly into the small round lens and then rolled his eyes, trusting that Bruce was zoomed in enough to see it. The dry chuckle over the comm a second later told him he was right.

Clark followed the path. It led into what could very modestly be called Bruce’s backyard. The glass-walled conservatory at the back of the manor’s public wing had its doors wide open. The cobblestone patio was dotted with high round tables, each with a small floral centrepiece that matched the arch. Most of the tables were empty as of now, and the small white candles were unlit.

A large swath of grass beyond the patio was cordoned off with red-roped stanchions, and an artificial path like the one Clark was walking on led from the cobblestones to a bar— one of three set up for the party. A second outdoor bar was in the rose garden around the corner of the conservatory, and the last was inside, in the main ballroom.

“AJ’s on his way, and my security detail’s been briefed,” Bruce reported as Clark’s eyes passed over the pairs of men in suits hovering in various places along the stanchion line and near each of the bars. “I didn’t tell them everything, of course, but they know enough to keep an eye on him.”

Clark nodded, again assuming that Bruce would see him, and watched a few servers come out of the conservatory and circulate among the few guests with trays of glasses of wine. A woman in a green pencil skirt took one and shifted her weight like her high-heeled shoes were hurting her feet.

“Hopefully, you won’t be needed,” Bruce added. Then he paused and let some of the Batman out of his voice like excess air from a tire. “But thank you for coming.”

“Free food and an open bar?” Clark murmured into his collar as he fiddled with the WE lanyard name badge he’d been given at the registration table. “Just try and keep me away.”

Bruce huffed again. “Not free. You pay with a couple hours of vapid conversation.”

Clark shook his head again but couldn’t correct his friend’s pessimism out loud due to the group of men in ties coming up the path behind him.

“I’d say blend in and have fun,” Bruce went on, “but your insistence on being early means that might be a challenge.”

Clark turned away from the group of men, looking out over the grounds beyond the stanchions. “The invite said five,” he said in an undertone. He’d arrived at 5:15. That wasn’t early, that was *late.*

Bruce snorted. “Didn’t I tell you nobody’s ever on time for these things? Hell, I live here, and I’m not planning to show up until at least six.”

But that’s you, Clark almost said, but it wouldn’t be the truth. That was *Brucie,* not the man currently perched in front of a monitor in his basement.

“Anyway. Enjoy the pigs-in-a-blanket,” said Bruce.

Of all the things that Clark would expect Bruce to say, that was... not. Was it a joke? It had to be a joke. Bruce Wayne would not—Bruce Wayne would *never*—serve something so basic, so *plebeian,* as pigs-in-a-blanket, would he?

Bruce answered his unasked question. “The servers will call them something else, but that’s what they are. Potato skins and BBQ sliders will be out later. The spice mix probably isn’t as good as your dad’s, but, you know. We take what we can get.”

With a tiny *beep,* the comm disconnected. Clark closed his mouth, which was hanging slightly open, then turned and blinked around the garden, adjusting his glasses. It took him a moment to find the commercial kitchen on the other side of the manor’s brick exterior. The caterers and servers were bustling around under Alfred’s supervision. Clark zeroed in on the trays of hors d’oeuvres currently heating in the oven.

“Well, I’ll be,” he said under his breath.

Had Bruce done this for him, because he’d known Clark would be here? Had he asked the caterers to prepare some options that Clark

would recognize? He knew Clark hated the usual fancy party fare—slimy oysters that reeked of onions and vinegar, shot glasses of cold sludge that dishonoured the good and noble name of soup, scraps of paper-thin meat and sour cheese served on bread so hard it would hurt his teeth if his teeth could be hurt by something like that. One event he'd attended in the spring had expected him to eat raw beef with a whole uncooked egg yolk on top of it. Clark had definitely complained to Bruce about that—he'd complained to *everyone* about that—but he hadn't expected Bruce would actually *listen.*

But apparently he had, and Clark wasn't kidding: he was mostly here for the free food. He'd come right after work, and it was a day where he'd skipped lunch— never his favourite, but kind of inevitable in both his lines of work.

He tracked a server with a full tray exiting the kitchen and headed towards the open conservatory doors, planning an intercept. But a soft sound of surprised recognition ahead and to his left told him he'd never make it. He sighed internally and accepted a glass of white wine from a different server instead, waiting a few seconds for whoever it was to approach him.

"Mr. Kent?" the woman called, and Clark glanced up as if surprised. (Well, he was surprised, because—) "I'm not sure you remember me? Dr. Dorothy Moynahan, Goth Corp Agricultural Sciences."

"Of course. Nice to see you again," Clark lied as he shook her outstretched hand.

"You too," said Moynahan. (Clark wasn't the only one lying). She gestured at the small group trailing behind her, two men and one woman. "These are some of my colleagues, Dr. Delaney, Dr. Mehta, and my personal assistant, Su Hee— oh, but you can call her Sue. We all do. It's just easier."

Judging from the tightness in Su Hee's jaw, it wasn't easier for her. "Nice to meet you all," Clark said regardless.

"Mr. Kent's with the *Daily Planet,"* Moynahan explained to her colleagues. "He came to me to get an expert opinion for his exposé on that fertilizer conglomerate— what, a year ago now?"

There was ice in Moynahan's words, a dagger sheathed in her friendly tone. Clark nodded, sipping his wine so he wouldn't have to speak.

"Unfortunately, quite a lot of our interview ended up being cut, and, if

I recall correctly, we never did get a chance to do a follow-up and set the record straight about eutrophication."

"Eutrophication?" one of Moynahan's colleagues repeated. "That's what the article was about?"

"How pedestrian," said the other scientist.

Actually, the article was about the substantial environmental degradation of wetlands around the newest fertilizer plant acquired by a multinational corporation with more shell companies than Clark had pairs of underwear. The article was about how local residents had complained ever since that their tap water turned green every summer, and how their grassroots initiative succeeded in stopping the company from bulldozing a marsh a few years ago to make the factory bigger. The article was about how the company's team of corporate lawyers had managed to circumvent the group's legally-obtained injunction by convincing a judge that 'community good' wasn't clearly defined enough by the law to intervene in the corporation's legal right to seek profit. The article was about how residents were moving away from the factory if they could afford it and drinking exclusively bottled water if they couldn't. The article was about the unjust destruction of a community by people who dressed like Dr. Moynahan and attended events like this more often than they thought about the consequences of their record profits.

Clark blinked and put his anger away. It wasn't useful right now, and this wasn't what he'd come here to do.

"The news cycle moves fast," he said. The almost-apology burned his tongue, but it was far from the first time he'd had to say something like this. "By the time that article got published, I was already neck-deep in the next one. But if there are any new developments in the case, or if a related story comes up, I'll make sure we reach out, Dr. Moynahan."

Moynahan seemed mollified by this, but being near her made Clark's skin itch, so he only endured the group's polite conversation for a few more minutes before excusing himself. He gave his half-empty wine glass to a server collecting dishes and carried on towards the rose garden, his eyes locked on another server with a full tray of appetizers.

He never made it. Just half a dozen steps past Moynahan, he was waylaid again, this time by a group of four men in flashy, expensive-

looking blazers. They were somehow already halfway to drunk and thought Clark was someone named 'Jonesy' from their division at WE. Clark laughed about the mix-up with Ivory Floral, Navy Floral, and Shiny Silver, while Thankfully-Too-Dark-To-Be-The-Joker-But-Definitely-Still-Purple crossed the grass to get four more beers from the bar. He stumbled on some invisible imperfection but kept his footing without spilling (much). His hand smelled strongly of beer when he passed a dripping glass to Shiny Silver right in front of Clark's face.

"Sorry, I didn't know what you wanted, Jonesy lookalike," he said, pulling the beery hand to his mouth.

"He really is a dead ringer," said Navy Floral.

"I must just have one of those faces," Clark offered, watching mournfully as another tray of pigs-in-a-blanket passed him by. They had poppy seeds on the dough. *Probably for texture,* Clark thought, his mouth watering slightly as he imagined the dry crunch contrasting with that buttery dough and salty, smoky meat.

He pulled his gaze away to find Ivory Floral's eyes focused on him—as focused as they could be with alcohol clouding his irises.

"I don't know," he was saying. "I think it's just the glasses."

"Jonesy has almost the exact same pair," Not-The-Joker's-Purple agreed.

"Take them off?" said Navy Floral.

Clark pushed his glasses up higher instead. "Sorry, no can do," he said. "Without them I'm blind as— I'm hopeless without them."

The Flashy Foursome accepted this, and Clark excused himself just a moment later and walked away.

It was past five-thirty now, and the party was filling up, getting louder. Unlike the Blazer Bros, most of the guests were sober, or maybe they were just corporate-event-after-work-on-a-Thursday-drunk, which wasn't as noticeable as regular-drunk. In any case, smiles and switching the stem of a wine glass to the other hand in order to grab an hors d'oeuvre as it passed seemed to be the order of the day. Bruce had explained to him that this was primarily a networking event disguised as a social gathering. It was a chance, as Bruce put it, for his senior associates and above to blow off a little

steam and rub elbows with their counterparts at WE's client firms, sub-consultant teams, and even their competitors. Several folks from LexCorp would be coming through the party before the night was over, though Bruce had assured him that Luthor himself had declined the invitation via a polite but chilly phone call earlier in the week.

There was an energy to events like these. Though Clark had never attended the Wayne Enterprises Annual Garden Party himself, he recognized the way that the smiles and chatter counterbalanced the watchful eyes that darted around the crowd. It was in the posture of people eager to put their best foot forward, the way they spoke, the way they laughed and ate and asked each other questions. Everyone in this space was wearing a mask, flirting with the thrill of speaking frankly to people with whom they could never be honest.

But there was something else growing among the guests, something slightly restless in the way that people turned and looked around. They were searching for something— *someone.* After all, the Garden Party was the most accessible event where Bruce Wayne was guaranteed to make an appearance. Galas, charity balls, fundraising dinners— the cost of entry to those events was impossibly high for most people, even the best paid senior employees at Wayne Enterprises and its ilk. A lot of the guests in this garden never got the chance to speak casually with their CEO. Looking around the crowd, Clark could recognize the curiosity and hunger of the younger associates, eager to impress him; the grudging respect of those more on his level at similar firms; and the worry from the WE board that he might show up and embarrass himself and, by extension, them.

Clark had no idea how Bruce dealt with these conflicting expectations of him, with the knowledge that anyone that he met could have any number of good or bad beliefs about him and could react in any number of ways when those beliefs turned out to be true or not. Clark didn't envy that publicity at all. To walk into a party like this and have everyone looking at him sounded like a nightmare— a version of that stress dream he sometimes still had about being in his high school play and forgetting all his lines the second he stepped onstage.

Thankfully, he didn't have to deal with any of that. He could just come to events like this for the free food. He took another glass of white wine as he wandered into the rose garden, following another server like a lost child at the mall. But by the time he caught up to her, she was holding an empty tray.

"Sorry, hon," she said, obviously spotting the way Clark had started to

reach out, then awkwardly redirected to check his watch. “Don’t worry, I’ll be right back with more! Just stay put, okay?”

“Thank you,” Clark said sincerely, but just a few seconds later, Bruce was in his ear again.

“Heads up, AJ’s here.”

Clark nodded subtly—Bruce could probably still see him—and turned around, cutting across the grass to the cobblestone patio outside the open doors of the conservatory. From here, he had a good view of almost the entire outdoor party area, with easy access to the indoor spaces if he needed to get there. He hoped that he wouldn’t, that this plan wasn’t as reckless as it had seemed when Bruce laid it out for him, because it sure seemed like Bruce was using his friend and employee as bait to lure the LexCorp killer out into the open.

“Highly doubtful,” Bruce had said when Clark pointed this out to him. “The killer has a very specific M.O. that has not varied across four victims. They follow the target for hours, possibly even days, and strike when they’re alone and vulnerable. Then they stage the death to make it seem accidental. So the odds of the killer making a move against AJ in such a densely populated event, under so many eyes, are infinitesimally small. Between my driver, my security team, and you, AJ is never going to be alone at the Garden Party.”

“So what’s the point of him coming?” Clark asked.

“Two-fold. One, it sends a message. AJ has been keeping a low profile since the break-ins, working remotely from Metropolis. Him showing up here, in Gotham City, at my party, tells LexCorp that his refusal to their job offer was final, and there’s no chance of tempting him away from Wayne Enterprises.”

“And two?”

“Two, how LexCorp guests react to his presence might give us a clue as to the identity of the killer. Specifically, I want to observe how Dr. Cronin reacts. He knew Dr. Rota and what she was working on, which may be related to what AJ knows and why LexCorp wanted to recruit him. Seeing AJ at the party might push Cronin into revealing something.”

“So you *are* trying to piss off the people who might be trying to kill him,” Clark summarized, unimpressed.

Bruce didn't apologize. "People reveal a lot when they're angry."

Clark hadn't seen Cronin yet. Bruce had provided some photos of the man for reference, and he'd watched a few videos from the man's social media to get a sense of the sound of his voice and his mannerisms, but so far he hadn't noticed any of the above while wandering around the party. Cronin, if he was still coming, was late.

Clark sipped his wine and watched the party move around him. A lot more guests had arrived in the last fifteen or twenty minutes, and it was nice to shrink into himself and just people watch. No one seemed to see him, and no one approached him. Unfortunately, this included servers who now had delightfully tiny hamburgers on their trays.

Finally, AJ passed under the floral arch. His shoulders high, his eyes moved around the party, glossing over Clark entirely. Clark watched him clock the security team, though, and he watched the team watch him in turn as he shook a few hands and got himself a glass of red wine. Slowly, the tension leaked out of his neck and shoulders, but Clark and the guards stayed alert.

Movement in his peripheral vision caught his attention a few minutes later. It was a hand, rising kind of quickly. Clark tensed and relaxed faster than anyone could notice. The hand was just coming up to cover a mouth. A woman, with shoulder-length blonde hair, talking sidelong to the man in a grey suit jacket beside her. Her husband, Clark assumed, given how her other perfectly manicured hand lay on his forearm. Both their eyes were fixed on AJ. Clark concentrated, letting the background party noise fade out until he could listen in on their conversation.

"—any minute now, I'm sure," the woman was saying.

"Setting a fine example," the man replied, talking through his smile the way that Bruce was so good at and Clark was so terrible at.

"He's a very busy man," said the woman like an apology.

Her husband huffed, but all trace of his annoyance disappeared a second later when someone came up and introduced herself to the couple.

Clark tuned them out again before they gave their names; he'd heard enough to confirm that they were no threat. They were just looking for Bruce, like so many others, and Clark didn't need to eavesdrop to guess at the kinds of things people said about his friend behind his

back.

He and the couple didn't have long to wait. Just minutes later, a ripple moved through the party, starting in the ballroom and radiating out. By the time Bruce himself appeared on the cobblestone patio—wearing a black and tan patterned shirt under a sand-coloured suit, his gold watch and cufflinks glinting in the late sun—there wasn't a person present who wasn't aware of him.

Clark looked away after a quick glance, instead watching the guests to make sure no one was about to take advantage of the crowd's distraction to go after AJ. But that wasn't all he was doing. He was also looking for someone else— Bruce had told him about the new kid last week, mentioning that he might be attending tonight and confessing that his presence was another reason he wanted Clark to be a second set of eyes at the party. Clark was disappointed when he didn't spot him; he'd been eager to meet this kid-who-wasn't-Robin.

Clark had been surprised when Bruce told him about Tim, but he was also glad. After Jason, it was obvious Bruce needed something different. Maybe being a regular foster father to a regular teenager could be part of that, Clark thought. And—according to the little that Bruce had shared—so far, so good, it seemed. Tim was apparently a smart, polite kid who liked photography, skateboarding, and true crime stories. He'd had a wealthy upbringing as well, so he and Bruce had that in common, too.

Which was all the more reason that Clark was surprised Tim hadn't shown up at Bruce's side tonight. He would think the kid would be used to events like this (unlike Dick or Jason). Curious, Clark turned slightly towards the house and scanned the family wing. He quickly picked out the small figure standing in an upstairs room.

"It's an annual tradition, what was he thinking?"

The blonde woman wasn't speaking loudly—in fact, it was more of an outraged whisper—but Clark's ears were already half-tuned to the sound of her voice, so he heard her and her husband as if they were standing right beside him.

"Brucie Wayne, thinking? You got him mixed up with someone else, dear."

"Thinking or not, he understands networking!" the woman continued in a hiss. "This is an opportunity to get Timothy's name out there, make some connections, maybe start the ball rolling on an internship

next summer!"

Timothy? Clark repeated to himself. He didn't think anyone else here knew that Bruce was fostering, let alone knew the kid's name. Using their voices, Clark zeroed in on the couple, who were just a few steps inside the conservatory now and on the move, heading into the ballroom.

"Maybe Wayne's assuming he'll work for him," said the man, in the kind of tone that others would use to announce that they'd stepped in a cow patty.

"Let him try," said the woman, with a sharpness that surprised Clark. "I've got at least two connections inside who'd raise a nepotism charge faster than—"

"Pulled pork slider, sir?" said the smiling server, suddenly right in front of him.

Clark smiled back and—though it nearly caused him literal, physical pain—said, "No, thank you. Excuse me."

He stepped forward when the server stepped aside and went to the conservatory doors, planning to follow the couple through the ballroom. But he hesitated, glancing back over his shoulder towards AJ, now deep in the crowd, chatting with a glass of wine in his hand. Clark's duty was to keep an eye on him, not chase down people who had a grudge against Bruce Wayne. Whoever this couple was, they didn't seem concerned about AJ, and angry mutters about Bruce were far from a murder attempt.

He met Bruce's eye across the garden, just for a second, and that confirmed it. Batman was leading this op, and Batman wanted Superman *here,* keeping an eye on AJ. Clark tuned out the couple's conversation from inside the ballroom and headed back to the cobblestone patio to do his job.

The server passed him going the other way. She now had nothing but crumbs left on her platter.

Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

> Tim takes advantage of the Garden Party to do some snooping. He discovers a bit more than he bargained for.

> *Tim stood in the centre of the Bruce's study and turned in a slow circle, letting his eyes drink in every detail. The room had no other doors—not even a closet—which meant that the entrance to the lower level had to be concealed somehow.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tim stepped back from the black statue of a crouching lion at the base of the main stairs and squinted, realizing as he did so that he'd never looked so closely at this statue during the entire time that he'd lived here at Wayne Manor. He tilted his head, then stepped forward again and adjusted the tiny device that was currently blending into the lion's back paw.

There, he thought. Now he just had to test it.

He pulled up the app on his phone and confirmed that everything was synching properly. He then circled the statue and approached the stairs.

His phone buzzed, a notification appearing on the screen before he'd even set one foot on the lowest step. The sensor by the lion's back paw didn't have a camera, so there was no image attached to the notification. But it was enough.

He crossed the foyer back towards the door that led to the manor's public wing. This time he didn't go directly to the stairs, instead just crossing in front of the statue, heading in the direction of the kitchen.

Bzz! Tim smiled.

He tested it a few more times, tossing a paper ball towards the statue on his last attempt just to see how sensitive the motion sensor was. His phone alerted him to the movement, even though Tim's aim

wasn't perfect, and the paper ball didn't quite go in the direction he'd planned.

Satisfied, he turned back towards the stairs and started to climb. At the top, he turned left.

Finding the motion sensor had been a stroke of luck. Last Friday, he and his friends had been allowed to go to the mall again. Their parents—including, apparently, Bruce—had coordinated behind the kids' backs on a set of conditions: they weren't allowed to leave the mall, and they had to wait by the security office for a ride that came precisely at nine when the mall closed.

This meant that they spent longer than usual browsing the stores and kiosks indoors. When they found a discount booth advertising, *SALE! NANNY CAM! CATCH THIEF! SALE!,* Tim and his friends had taken turns reading the sign from across the hall, repeating it over and over again with the emphasis on different syllables, until they were bent over laughing themselves sick.

Eventually, they wandered away in search of their next adventure. Tim lagged behind, letting the rest of the group go ahead, but Pat stayed by his side as he crossed the hall to the kiosk and pulled out his wallet to buy a cheap motion sensor. When Pat asked him why he was buying it, Tim waved it away with the explanation that the sign had been a very effective advertisement. (Pat's fond, "Weirdo," under their breath had made Tim's cheeks go warm.)

But Tim wasn't trying to catch a thief tonight. He just needed an early warning system. Last time—the Tuesday night after the shoe store incident—had been way too close of a call. He'd gone looking for Alfred an hour or so after that awkward and baffling conversation with Bruce in the kitchen about going public in the lead-up to the Garden Party. Tim had come down the hall from his bedroom just in time to see Alfred heading in the opposite direction at the top of the stairs. He'd stayed out of sight and waited, driven by curiosity and some instinct that he couldn't quite identify.

When minutes passed and Alfred didn't return, he'd followed. Several opened doors later and a quick sweep of the rest of the upstairs and most of the downstairs, Tim concluded that Alfred had disappeared. And there was no sign of Bruce, either, despite him saying that he'd be working for the rest of the evening.

Tim had gone back down the hall, the same hall he was walking down

now, and zeroed in on the study. But his brief, careful investigation—he touched *nothing*—had barely begun when a strange hum started up in the wall. Tim had stood there for so long trying to pin down what the sound was and why it was familiar. Finally, he realized it was an elevator, and it was familiar because of the old dumbwaiter at Drake Manor that he used to race upstairs when he was ten years old and bored out of his mind.

By the time he figured that out, it was nearly too late. He flew down the hall to the top of the stairs and skidded around the corner as a pair of footsteps creaked on the hardwood floor in the study behind him. He yanked his headphones up over his ears and, in his peripheral vision, he saw Bruce round the corner just as he reached his bedroom door. He ducked inside without looking, hoping it seemed like he was just coming back from the bathroom and not running for his life from the Batman.

He stood behind the door, slowing his breathing as quietly as he could, until Bruce's footsteps passed without stopping. He waited another thirty seconds just in case, then put his pyjamas on, expecting that Bruce would be coming by to say goodnight any minute.

Bruce did knock on his door a little bit later, but instead of a quick goodnight, Tim got another baffling conversation that felt like a dance he didn't know the steps to. He'd been living in fear the last few days that Dick would break his word about the whole Bug thing, and that conversation didn't help.

You can tell me anything, Tim, Bruce had said.

Like he knew there was something to tell, and he was giving Tim the opportunity to come clean, once and for all.

I want you to be safe.

Like he knew Tim's hobby of chasing criminals with a camera after dark wasn't. The words were a little too close to what Nightwing had told him.

But it wasn't like Tim could just ask if that was what he meant, and Tim had read enough true crime stories to know that you never confessed anything without a lawyer present, so he'd kept his mouth shut and waited for Bruce to give up, say goodnight, and leave.

But then—

I'm proud of you.

Tim's heart stuttered again at the memory, just as it had that night. Proud? Of what— being an informant? Getting a Maroni lieutenant arrested? Hiding his identity from Batman for almost two years?

Again, Tim couldn't ask. Even if Dick had told Bruce about Bug, Dick didn't know that Tim knew their secret identities, so Bruce couldn't bring it up without outing himself as Batman. He'd need to find Tim in the cowl, just like Nightwing had, if he wanted to talk about it openly. And with Tim not even allowed to leave the mall, that wasn't likely to happen any time soon.

Now, more than a week later, Tim's anxiety had settled down again somewhat. Maybe Dick had told Bruce, maybe he hadn't, but either way there wasn't anything Tim could do about it. So instead, he focused on what he could do: he could research the clues he had about Batman's current serial killer case.

Nightwing had given him the name of one of the victims—Tiffany Close—but an online search turned up very little aside from her obituary. She either didn't have a social media presence, or she didn't use her real name if she did. Tim knew from his conversation with Bruce the day they went back-to-school shopping that Close and the other victims had worked at LexCorp, but he found no record of her on the company's website. And given how much trouble he'd had trying to get into its HR database back when he was investigating the man he'd seen in the park in Metropolis, Tim didn't dig too deep.

But Bruce had given him enough detail about Close and the others' deaths that he devoted an entire week of study hall to searching various databases to find homicide or suspicious death case files that matched what he knew. Of course, without being able to get into LexCorp, he couldn't confirm any of this, but he thought the four victims were Tiffany Close, Blake Hiss, Anthony Siemens, and Dr. Michaela Rota.

He also knew that Dr. AJ Marcus was the would-be fifth victim, the one who got away. Tim scoured Dr. Marcus' social media and online presence, too, searching for connections to the four victims, and he found an article about Dr. Marcus winning a Thomas Wayne Medical Research Grant, complete with a photo of him and Bruce shaking hands. The article went into some detail about what Dr. Marcus was going to use the grant to research, and buried in the last paragraph was a mention of *fellow med school alumna Michaela Rota, with whom*

he is currently working on a device that could improve the quality of care in rural clinics around the world.

Which was... annoyingly vague.

None of Dr. Marcus' published papers—and Tim had read almost all of them by now—had anything more to say about this device, or what, exactly, it did. Tim could only conclude that the idea had been a flop — hopefully not too much of a waste of the Wayne Foundation's money.

And so, having more or less hit a dead end in the serial killer case, Tim went back to his original case: solving the mystery of how to enter the Batcave.

The Garden Party seemed like the perfect opportunity to do some snooping. Both Bruce and Alfred were going to be busy in the public wing of the manor, and, from what Alfred told him, no amount of money could bribe Dick to come around during one of these events, so Tim was left to his own devices in the family wing. And now, with his early warning system, Tim would have plenty of time to get back to his room if Bruce or Alfred happened to come over into this half of the manor for whatever reason.

The door to Bruce's study was closed but not locked. Tim opened it carefully, keeping an eye on the floor. He thought Bruce might have put something in the gap between the door and the frame, something that would fall out, letting him know that someone had opened it. Or maybe there was a trip wire or something. But Tim saw nothing. He silently shut the door behind him.

The blinds were open, but it was late enough in the day that the sun's light was fading fast. Tim crossed the room and pulled the blinds down, so the overhead light wouldn't be noticed from outside. (Not that this room looked out on the part of the grounds where the party was being held, but still.) Once the blinds were closed and the light was on, Tim stood in the centre of the room and turned in a slow circle, letting his eyes drink in every detail.

The room had no other doors—not even a closet—which meant that the entrance to the lower level had to be concealed somehow. He looked for seams in the walls and other irregularities, but nothing stood out. It had to be hidden behind a piece of furniture, or maybe the mantel, he decided. There had to be some kind of mechanism that would open it. Like a bookcase that swung out when a certain book on

the shelf got tugged. Or maybe it was something more tech-savvy, like a retinal scanner hidden in that bust of William Shakespeare. Or it could be as simple as a button under the desk.

When he completed the circle and found himself facing the window again, Tim set about ticking the possibilities off his mental list, one by one. The walls were smooth, and tapping them revealed no hollow spots. There was no extra bulk behind the bookcase that might hide a hinged door. The golden yellow settee against one wall didn't have any secrets that he could find. The bust of William Shakespeare was just a bust of William Shakespeare. (And it was really frickin' heavy.) He tugged on every book, but nothing happened. There were no buttons under the desk. He even lifted the framed pictures and documents on the wall. That was how he found a safe, which was a little disappointing—*that's the most obvious place for it, Bruce!*—but no secret door.

At a dead end, he glanced at the grandfather clock to check how long he'd been in here, but the time it displayed was incorrect. It wasn't even ticking. He sighed and started to pull his phone out of his pocket, then stopped. Looked again.

The clock was old—obviously an antique—and it was *massive*, easily six feet tall and very wide. Tim didn't know much about grandfather clocks, but were they supposed to be that big? He stood in front of it and held his arms out to his sides to measure it. He kept his arms where they were and went to the door for comparison. They were almost the exact same size.

He smiled when he turned around again, because he noticed the back of the clock. It was flush to the wall— not flush to the baseboard, like the bookcase was, where there was a small gap the rest of the way up. He couldn't see it unless he looked from a certain angle, but the clock seemed practically glued in place. He crouched down and looked more closely. His smile widened. The baseboard was cut on either side of it, like the clock was *built into the wall.*

Tim got to his feet. This was it. This *had* to be it! There was nothing else in the room that even came close. The clock was the secret door to the Batcave!

Now, Tim just had to figure out how to open it. His hands shaking slightly, he felt around the edges, searching for a latch or button. But he found nothing.

He went back to the bookcase, to the mantel. He lifted the bookends and set them down, searching for hidden buttons and listening closely for any kind of click that might indicate a lock disengaging. But everything was quiet.

He checked the desk again, reaching under the surface and feeling around for a switch. His got his hopes up when he found a rough patch of wood and a different texture way at the back, and he dropped down to the floor and crawled under the desk with his phone. He shone the flashlight up to find that the strange texture was an old sticker, so weirdly shaped and faded that it took him a long time to realize it was two words in bubble letters stacked on top of each other. It read, *COOL, DUDE!*— or, it had at one point.

And the rough patch of wood that Tim had felt right in front of it was a carving. The letters were pointy but clear, like the blade used to carve them was sharp but either too large or too small to manipulate easily in the cramped space under Bruce's desk. Tim stared at those three tiny letters—*JPT*—too interested in the way in which they'd been carved to recognize what they meant, until understanding hit him like a wave.

A chill ran down his spine and he got out from under Bruce's desk with the very distinct feeling that he didn't belong there.

Tim tried to shake off the weirdness and get back to what he was doing, but what had seemed so exciting just a few minutes ago now felt kind of creepy, like exploring an abandoned house. He sighed and threw his eyes around the room one last time, looking for anything that seemed out of place while also checking to make sure that he hadn't left anything amiss.

With impeccable timing, his phone buzzed in his hand just a minute later. Tim quickly turned out the light, reopened the blinds, and left the room, closing the door softly behind him. He hurried down the hall but paused right before the top of the stairs, staying out of sight. He inched towards the edge of the wall as he heard low voices downstairs, wanting to get a look at who he was dealing with.

He was expecting Alfred. His second guess, when he heard a man's voice without a British accent, was that Bruce was giving some favoured guests a tour. But then a woman spoke, and Tim froze.

"This is a discussion that requires a little privacy," said Janet Drake.

"Also a guarantee that you won't make an excuse and disappear in the

crowd," said Jack Drake.

They were *here.* How were they here, Tim wondered. *Why* were they here?

"Are we supposed to be in this part of the house?" asked another man. Tim didn't know his voice.

"We'll just be a minute," his father said quickly. Dangerously. "You've been avoiding me."

"Now, Jack, I wasn't—"

"Three times I've called your office in the last two weeks, and three times I was told that you were out. What other conclusion am I supposed to draw?"

"We've had a very busy quarter, Jack, I'm sure you can understand."

"Sure, sure," said Jack, "but I'm not asking for the moon here, Seb. I just want an update on the prototype."

Tim felt something in his chest recoil at the familiar turn of phrase. He had forgotten—how had he forgotten?—that that was his father's favourite expression.

I know you've never been an athlete, but I'm not asking for the moon here. Just try out for the football team. What could it hurt?

You can do AP Business, too, can't you, sport? I mean, it's not like we're asking you for the moon.

We can drop the nanny, don't you think? You're eleven years old, you can take care of yourself. Not asking for the moon, right?

"I can assure you," said the unknown man, "that the project is on schedule."

"You said that when Mr. Siemens died."

Siemens? Tim was jarred from his memories. That was a name from Bruce's serial killer case. He was almost positive Siemens was one of the four LexCorp employees who'd died under mysterious circumstances.

"And again after Dr. Rota's unfortunate accident a few months ago," Tim's mother chimed in.

“Have you found anyone to replace her yet?” asked his father.

They were tag-teaming this conversation, Tim realized. That never ended well, he thought as he inched a little further along the wall. He could see his parents’ backs now, his mother’s pink cardigan over an ivory dress and his father’s charcoal suit. But he still couldn’t quite see who they were talking to.

“Not yet,” said the man in question.

“Not yet? It’s been months!” Jack exploded.

“We had someone tapped, but he backed out,” the man explained, his voice getting more agitated.

Tim could see his lapel now, and a pale blue tie with a clip that glinted in the light of the chandelier overhead. Why did that seem familiar?

“Just help us to understand, Sebastian,” said Janet calmly. Patronizingly. “You say the generator prototype is coming along according to schedule, but without a project lead, well, I’m sure you can see why we’re concerned.”

Sebastian. Tim poked his head around the corner for a fraction of a second to get a look at his face. It was him. It was Dr. Sebastian Cronin, the interim head of biotechnology at LexCorp, the man that Tim had photographed in the park in Metropolis, the man who’d slipped a handful of bills to one of Falcone’s employees.

“Dr. Rota left very detailed notes,” Cronin was saying. “And we reached out to one of her past collaborators who was able to provide some information that—”

“I’m just asking you to be straight with me, Seb, one way or the other,” Jack interrupted. “If it isn’t gonna happen, just tell me.”

A pause. Tim wondered who the ‘past collaborator’ was until he realized he could make a guess, based on what he already knew: it was Dr. Marcus. Tim wondered if Cronin had acquired those notes through the break-ins at his house and the WE lab.

“We have had some setbacks,” Cronin admitted, but he couldn’t say more before Jack went off on him again.

“Setbacks? Your project lead and her entire team are dead!”

That was strange. Tim didn't know that all four victims worked on the same team. Did Batman know that? Surely Batman knew that.

"The Contracts department is getting very nervous," Janet was saying, calming things down again. "It was already risky for Drake Industries to sign off on the purchase agreement, sight unseen."

"I know. Believe me, I know," said Cronin with a sigh. "LexCorp wants nothing more than to secure new business and explore new collaborations with Drake Industries."

"Marketing drivel," Tim's father muttered.

"Hush," said his mother, which sent an unexpected chill down Tim's spine. It'd been a long time since he'd heard that.

"None of us, not even Dr. Rota, saw the accident coming," said Cronin.

Tim frowned. That was a weird thing to say. Of course Dr. Rota didn't see her (supposed) car accident coming.

"She certainly couldn't have predicted how it would impact each member of her team," Cronin went on. "But we've been analyzing what went wrong and addressing each failure point, one at a time. It breaks my heart to say it, but through their deaths, Dr. Rota and her team might have done more for the generator than they ever could have imagined."

Another pause. Tim's head was spinning. Cronin wasn't talking about Dr. Rota's apparent car accident. He was talking about her and her team like they'd died heroically all together, but they didn't. They'd been *murdered,* one by one, probably by the Falcone crime syndicate. So either Cronin was lying to Tim's parents, or...

"I'm sure the press coverage isn't helping," said Janet.

"No," Cronin agreed. "Thankfully, we've been able to keep the truth out of the public eye, but you're right, Janet, everyone on this team died trying to bring their vision of the generator to fruition. It would be a disservice to their memory to stop now."

...or LexCorp was orchestrating a massive cover-up. And Tim's parents were somehow involved? But what about the Falcones??

"That's how we have to think of it," said Jack.

“We’ve been acting with an abundance of caution ever since,” Cronin went on, “but I assure you, we are still on track to finish on schedule. I hope that’s of some comfort to your Contracts department.”

“We’ll pass along the message,” said Janet.

“Thank you, Sebastian,” Jack said.

It sounded like they were wrapping up. Tim needed to— what did he need to do? He had to tell someone about what he’d just overheard. But he couldn’t bring it up directly to Bruce, obviously. So he’d have to circumvent him, get a message to Gordon, or maybe to Nightwing. Maybe he could arrange a meeting somehow? But—

“There you are, sport!” exclaimed his father’s voice suddenly. “We’ve been looking all over for you!”

Tim suddenly realized that Cronin was gone.

His parents were looking straight at him.

They were coming up the stairs.

Chapter End Notes

> I know, I know! A cliffhanger?! Jail for author! Jail for one thousand years!

Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

Unexpected guests crash the party. There are consequences.

“Your hair must’ve grown three inches since the summer,” said his father, knocking his fist lightly against Tim’s upper arm. “What’s old Brucie feeding you, huh?”

Brucie. *The glancing touch reminded him of a hand on his shoulder, tight and reassuring, of expensive clothing under his fingers that it was okay to hang on to.*

Chapter Notes

Posting a little early because I was pretty mean last time with that cliffhanger.

“Timothy! Oh, my boy, look at you!” cried his mother. Her dress pulled tight around her knees as she climbed to him. He watched as her skirt, her legs, and her eggshell pumps drew near.

She hugged him. Tim stared over her shoulder as he breathed in her perfume. Then his brain and body caught up. He closed his eyes, raised his arms to return the embrace. His phone was still in his right hand, and it pressed flat against her cashmere cardigan for a breath before she pulled away.

“Your hair must’ve grown three inches since the summer,” said his father, knocking his fist lightly against Tim’s upper arm. “What’s old Brucie feeding you, huh?”

Brucie. The glancing touch reminded him of a hand on his shoulder, tight and reassuring, of expensive clothing under his fingers that it was okay to hang on to.

“Well, don’t just stand there, aren’t you gonna say something?” said his father, and Tim snapped back to the present.

“Mom,” he said at last. “Dad, what are you doing here?”

“We get an invite to Wayne Enterprises’ Garden Party every year,” his mother explained. She reached out like she just couldn’t help it and brushed his hair back from his eyes. “We’re not usually in town for the

month of September, though, as I'm sure you remember."

Oh, yeah. Tim remembered. He remembered being confused when classmates rolled their eyes about their parents forcing them to take first-day-of-school photos. He remembered forging signatures on documents that were sent home when his parents missed the fall parent-teacher conference. He remembered loud alarms on cool autumn mornings to get him up in time for the bus. He remembered reminding himself to brush his teeth before he left the house. He remembered eating dinner alone as sunset came a little earlier each day.

"Seemed pretty important to attend this year," said his father.

"How else were we going to see you?" his mother asked.

You could see me every weekend if you wanted to, Tim thought.

What he said instead was, "We're not supposed to see each other alone like this, are we?"

"Oh, please," his father scoffed. "Who's gonna know?"

"And we're not causing any harm," his mother added, touching his hair again. Tim didn't know whether to lean in or pull away, so he opted to stay completely still.

"You're certainly not going to tell anyone, are you, sport?" said his father. Tim shook his head on instinct. "Good man."

Warmth flooded into him suddenly— into his chest and into his eyes. He closed them and chased his mother's hand with his head until she *tsk*ed and tugged him under her arm.

"You're getting too big for this," she said quietly. Tim nodded but didn't move. "We couldn't just leave things like that, after your birthday," she went on after a moment.

Tim frowned and opened his eyes. At the shift in his body language, his mother pulled back. "You knew it was my birthday?" Tim asked.

"Of course we did," his mother answered.

"We were there when you were born, remember?" said his father with a laugh that was louder than it needed to be.

"It was just so distracting, with that awful woman there, listening to

every word we said."

Tim blinked, realizing his mother was talking about Lillian.

"We've had our lawyers working on it ever since," his father told him. "When we get you home, we'll have a real birthday party."

Tim felt his lower lip move— tremble. *Huh.* He didn't know that was a real thing that could happen.

"But it's been hard," said his mother. "We haven't had any luck so far. That's why we thought we'd come tonight."

"We had business, too," his father cut in. At his mother's sharp look, he added, "Two birds, you know?"

"We wanted to let you know that we're working on the situation," his mother said.

"The situation," Tim heard himself repeat.

"But we can't even send you an email without somebody reading over our shoulder," his father muttered, shaking his head.

"We're fighting for you," his mother reiterated. "The sooner we get this deal made to take care of the business, the sooner we can sort out the legal trouble and get you home."

"A boy belongs with his father," said Jack Drake, and then—

Then, several things happened at once.

The first, experienced distantly, was a buzz from Tim's phone, still in his hand. The next was a voice that called his name. Then footsteps thundered up the stairs. And then his own feet left the ground.

Tight arms were around him— *safe,* Tim's brain told him, even before the rest of him caught up. His socks hit the floor again just a few seconds later, and then he was looking at the back of Bruce's tan suit.

"Jack, Janet, this is extremely inappropriate," Bruce said. He sounded off— out of breath. "You know the rules. You're not to approach Tim without his case worker present."

"Now, see here, Bruce, be reasonable," Jack began, but Bruce cut him off.

“You will leave. Now,” he added, in a voice that Tim had never heard up close before. “You have no right to be here.”

“We *were* invited,” Janet protested mildly.

“That was an oversight that will not happen again,” said Bruce, still speaking in that quiet, dangerous tone, still a little breathless. “My security team will escort you from the premises.”

Tim glanced around Bruce and noticed the pair of men in sleek black suits with walkie-talkies, waiting by the door that led to the public wing. They were accompanied by a third man in a much shabbier brown suit. He wore glasses and carried no radio.

More words were said as Tim’s parents went back down the stairs, but Tim didn’t really hear any of them. Instead he found himself watching Bruce. Or, more specifically, Bruce’s hands.

Bruce’s hands were moving.

He was standing perfectly still, positioned right where he’d landed when he raced up the stairs and grabbed Tim to trade places with him. In other words, he was still between Tim and his parents, even though his parents had already disappeared, having been led down the stairs and out the door by the security team.

He wasn’t even blinking, Tim realized, leaning forward a little to see him in profile. Still, his hands moved restlessly, closing into loose fists then re-opening, then closing again, over and over. It was strange, but what was even stranger was that Tim couldn’t seem to look away. Bruce stared at the place where Tim’s parents used to be, and Tim stared at Bruce.

The spell broke just a few seconds later when the man in the shabby brown suit climbed the stairs. Both Tim and Bruce turned to look at him, and he smiled— kindly, a little awkwardly.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

Bruce turned around to face Tim properly for the first time since charging up the stairs. “Are you alright, Tim?”

Tim opened his mouth to say yes—nobody had hurt him or anything —but the weight of what had just happened seemed to hit him right in that moment. It felt physical, like his shoulders were sagging, his knees buckling.

They were *here.* His parents. They'd come to see him. They'd changed whatever their September plans were, so they could be in Gotham City for Bruce's party. To see him. They'd broken the rules of the custody arrangement. To talk to him. Tim couldn't remember the last time they'd done something like this—gone out of their way like this, taken a risk like this—for him. Maybe it had never happened before.

"Tim?" Bruce prompted.

Tim dragged his eyes back to Bruce. They'd wandered to the downstairs door where the back of his mother's pink cashmere cardigan had disappeared just minutes ago. Bruce, by contrast, was wearing linen, a light suit over a black Hawaiian-style patterned shirt. His collar was unbuttoned. It was a summer look— playful, casual.

Expensive. His gold cufflinks glinted as he reached out to put a hand on Tim's shoulder. The same shoulder his mother had wrapped her arm around. Tim couldn't remember the last time she did that, either, but he thought he was ten years old. Maybe twelve? He was shorter then, for sure. He fit better. Now, like she'd said, he was getting too big for—

"Hey," said Bruce softly, and he pulled Tim into a hug. At some point he must have crouched down because Tim's arms were at his shoulder blades. Tim's phone clattered to the floor as he opened his hands to hang on.

Quiet footsteps approached. Tim let go, and so did Bruce. Tim saw the man in the brown suit, bending over to pick up his phone. He handed it to Tim with another small smile.

"Thanks," Tim mumbled, slipping the phone back into his pocket.

"Tim, this is my friend, Clark," said Bruce, keeping a hand on Tim's shoulder, even though he was standing fully upright again. "Clark, this is Tim."

"Hi Tim, it's so nice to meet you," said Clark. He was still smiling, and now that Tim could see him up close, he thought that that smile looked familiar. But he was sure he'd never met Clark. He'd never met any of Bruce's friends, unless he was counting Dr. Marcus.

"Nice to meet you, too," said Tim, because it seemed like he was expected to say something.

It worked. Clark looked away and shared a nod with Bruce. "We're

good," he said, like he was expecting Bruce to ask. (Tim realized that he was expecting Bruce to ask, too.) "Not causing a scene. I don't think anybody even noticed."

"Good," said Bruce with obvious relief. "One less thing to worry about. And AJ?"

"Rose garden, talking to his Goth Corp clients," Clark reported. "A guard and the bartender both have eyes on him." Abruptly, Clark glanced at Tim. "Last I checked, anyway."

Something clicked in Tim's mind, and he thought he knew why he half-recognized Clark. "Are you head of security?" he asked. If he'd seen Clark around the grounds or at one of Bruce's galas in the past, that would explain it.

Bruce sent Tim a strange look, but Clark just chuckled. "No," he said. "Just lending them a hand tonight."

His lanyard name badge shifted slightly, and Tim caught sight of what was written on it. "You work for *The Daily Planet?"* he said. "That's in Metropolis, right?"

"Yes, and yes," said Clark. "I'm a reporter." He smiled some more and pushed his glasses up.

"On TV," Tim guessed. Maybe that was why he recognized Clark.

Clark's eyes shot to Bruce for a fraction of a second before he answered. "No. Print only."

Tim frowned. "Oh."

"Disappointed?" said Bruce, shaking his shoulder playfully.

A little, Tim thought, but he just shrugged. "How'd you meet Bruce?"

"I've met a lot of reporters," Bruce answered. "Clark's one of the few decent ones."

"Oh," Tim said again.

Clark waited a beat like he was giving Tim a chance to ask another question, then focused on Bruce again. "Alfred's talking with security to find out how the Drakes got in, but it sounds like they *were* on the guest list."

“Dammit,” Bruce said under his breath.

“Want me to find him for you?” asked Clark.

Bruce sighed. “You’d be better off finding my publicist. If any of this gets out, we’re gonna have a big problem.” He glanced at his watch. “Plus, my speech is supposed to start in fifteen minutes, so we need a smaller damage control strategy ready for when I miss it.”

“Okay, I’ll get her,” said Clark, turning back towards the stairs.

“No,” said Tim, and Clark stopped. Bruce looked over, surprised. “You can’t miss your speech,” Tim told him. “Not because of me.”

“Tim, it’s fine,” said Bruce. “We need to call Lillian about this situation right away. That’s much more important than my speech.”

But Tim was shaking his head. He couldn’t stop thinking about how his parents showed up, how they’d changed their plans, and how they were going to get in trouble because of him. He wasn’t going to make Bruce change his plans, too. Not when it was *his* party.

“This is all my fault,” Tim said as he chased these thoughts around his head.

“Not even a little,” Bruce countered, firmly enough that it broke through Tim’s spiral and made Tim look up. “It’s my fault. I should have realized that your parents might still be on the guest list. I should have had someone look into it. But it never occurred to me. I didn’t even think about it. I’m sorry, Tim.”

“They’ve never come before,” Tim said, because Bruce clearly still didn’t get it. “They get invited every year, but they’re always out of town in September. This year they changed their plans, so they could be here. So they could see me.”

“They could see you any time they wanted, Tim, but on the State’s terms,” said Bruce— and, *oh.* He was angry.

“But if I wasn’t here, none of this would have happened,” Tim heard himself say, and, *what the hell am I doing,* talking back? Bruce was angry, this was like an argument— Tim was *arguing.* Why was Tim arguing *with Batman?*

“Tim—”

“Neither one of you is to blame,” Clark interrupted, drawing both Tim’s and Bruce’s attention. “Tim’s parents disobeyed the signs asking guests to stay out of the family wing, as well as the court order that says they can’t have unsupervised visits. They’re in the wrong here, not either of you.”

“Quite right, Master Kent,” Alfred’s voice rang out from the bottom of the stairs. “The Drakes could have attended this event without incident, even granted the awkward circumstances surrounding the custody of their child. I would argue that they shouldn’t have, that it would have been an error of judgement on their part, but nonetheless they could have attended in a professional capacity.”

Tim leaned around Bruce. Alfred’s rigid posture and tight facial expression conveyed what Tim had suspected from hearing his perfectly enunciated syllables: Alfred was angry, too— possible angrier than Tim had ever seen him.

“Mr. and Mrs. Drake chose to disregard the clearly posted signage and visible physical markers that identified the party area,” Alfred went on. “They evaded security in order to make their way out of bounds and neither you, Master Bruce, nor you, Master Tim, could have predicted that.”

Tim nodded slowly. He definitely would not have predicted that his parents would show up to the party, let alone wander around where they weren’t supposed to be, on the off-chance that they’d get a chance to talk to him. Hadn’t he just been thinking about how they’d never done something like that before? How whatever kept them out of Gotham every September was obviously very important to them since they’d never showed up for any of the back-to-school rituals that everyone else’s parents participated in?

“I suggest you call Ms. Bartlett at once,” Alfred concluded, turning on his heel.

“I’ll find your publicist for you,” Clark added, heading down the stairs and following Alfred out.

And just like that, Tim was alone with Bruce.

“Tim,” he started, but Tim spoke at the same time.

“You really don’t have to skip your speech.”

“I know,” said Bruce. “I’m choosing to.”

“I wish you wouldn’t,” Tim muttered. He avoided Bruce’s eyes as Bruce assessed him.

“Why?” Bruce asked calmly.

Tim shrugged. He wasn’t sure he could put it into words, but he knew Bruce could wait him out if need be, so he decided to try. “It’s just— it seems like you’re making a big deal out of nothing.”

“Nothing?” Bruce repeated, less calm. “Tim—”

“I know, okay?” Tim interrupted, louder than he meant to be. Maybe Bruce and Alfred weren’t the only ones who were angry. “I know they broke the rules. I know there have to be, like, consequences for that, but they— they came here for *me.”*

His voice cracked on the last word, and his throat had a golf ball stuck in the middle of it, and his face was getting hotter by the second, but Bruce didn’t cut in. He was just watching and listening, and Tim— Tim, apparently, had more to say.

“Because *I’m* here. I’m *here,* at your house, Bruce. And you— you’re like this big, important person, okay? And I live at your house, and— and if I didn’t— if I was still with the Parnells, or the Hudsons, or in Mrs. Douglas’ shitty little apartment with her shitty little dog, they wouldn’t care. But because I’m *here,* and because *you’re* important, they— they’re making some kind of deal now, and they’re putting up a real legal fight. And now you’re gonna miss your speech, and my parents are gonna get in trouble, and it’s all because of *me.”*

“Tim…” Bruce tried again, as hot tears spilled out of Tim’s eyes.

“Why did you take me in?” Tim demanded, voicing the question that had been rattling around his head since his conversation with Nightwing on the rooftops. “Why am I even here? If you didn’t know —”

He cut himself off, choking on a sob and turning his face away.

“What? If I didn’t know what, Tim?” Bruce asked.

Tim shook his head. “Why do you even care?” he redirected.

“I—”

“It’d be a hell of a lot easier if you didn’t,” Tim spat. Literally— he

was so gross right now, all spit and snot and tears.

Silence hung between them for a moment until Bruce gently broke it.

“You’re right,” he agreed quietly. “It’s always easier not to care. To cut yourself off, to shut things out. To run and not look back instead of putting down roots. It hurts to care. And it’s frightening. But to go without...” He shook his head. “It’s worse. You can’t live like that, Tim. Trust me, I’ve tried.”

Tim sniffed and wiped his slimy, overheated face. He didn’t know why he was crying, he didn’t know why he was just yelling at Bruce, and he didn’t know how he was going to get out of this conversation with any of his dignity intact.

“I’m sorry for the way your parents have treated you,” Bruce said, his voice still soft but direct. No hesitation. “I’m sorry that they came to the party tonight and caught you off-guard. And whatever they said to you before I got here— if they made you feel guilty, or— or whatever they said to you to make you feel like this is your fault, that shouldn’t have happened. But Alfred was right. They broke the rules, not you. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Tim shook his head again, because that wasn’t really true. He thought back to his mother brushing his hair out of his eyes, putting her arm around his shoulder. He heard his father calling him *sport* and *good man,* and his eyes got embarrassingly wet again. Despite everything— despite knowing they were breaking the state’s rules, despite overhearing that they were maybe involved in covering up multiple murders with LexCorp—it had been *good* to see them. He’d— he’d *missed* them, even though he didn’t want to, even though it’d be easier if he didn’t.

Bruce made a small noise at the sight of Tim’s renewed tears and reached out again. Tim let himself be gathered in close once more. *Safe,* his mind told him, thinking of all the times he saw Batman carry someone away from danger. Tim wasn’t in any danger, though, so it was embarrassing, but he let himself hang on for just a minute more.

“It’ll be alright,” Bruce told him, voice rumbling in his chest. “We’ll figure it out, okay? It’ll be fine.”

“Please don’t skip your speech because of me,” Tim said, and Bruce pulled back. He opened his mouth, but Tim pressed on. “Please? I know you need to call Lillian or whatever, but can it wait? Can things just be normal, and we can pretend it didn’t happen? Just until the

end of the party?"

Bruce looked away for a moment, thinking. "Not until the end of the party," he said, "but I'll do my speech, and then make a few quick rounds to say goodnight. But I have one condition."

Relieved but wary, Tim said, "What?"

"I don't want you to be alone right now. Come into the public wing with me, and Alfred or Clark will keep you company in the kitchen. Deal?"

That... actually sounded kind of nice. Tim used to hang out in the kitchen and talk to the caterers when he got bored at the parties his parents would drag him to. He'd always found something comforting about a commercial kitchen filled with warmth and chatter.

"Deal," he agreed.

"Okay," said Bruce with a small, sad smile, and they headed down the stairs and through the door back to the public wing.

Clark and a woman that Tim assumed was Bruce's publicist were just a few steps down the hall, heading their way. The woman did a double take when she saw Tim at Bruce's side. Tim tried to turn his face away, hoping it wasn't super obvious that he'd just been crying.

"Shondra," Bruce greeted her. "Thanks for coming."

"Of course, Bruce. Your friend said you need to cancel your speech?" Shondra looked at Tim again. "Or are we just changing it to, uh, address certain topics?"

"None of the above, actually," Bruce told her, in a musical voice that Tim recognized from public appearances. It was like he'd become a new person right before his very eyes. "False alarm."

"Oh," said Shondra. She waited for a further explanation, but she didn't get one. Bruce sent a significant look towards Clark, then looped his arm around hers.

"Guide me up to the podium, would you?" he said.

"Sure thing, Bruce," Shondra replied with the air of someone indulging a small child's whims.

"Come on, Tim," said Clark, gesturing in the opposite direction.

“Alfred put aside some hors d’oeuvres and dessert for us.”

Tim followed, but at the back of his mind, it bothered him that Bruce hadn’t actually told Clark about the plan to look after him for the next little while. It also bothered him that Clark didn’t seem troubled by Tim’s face the way that Shondra was. Tim hadn’t been crying in front of Clark, but Clark hadn’t seemed at all surprised by his red face, and Bruce hadn’t said a word about it.

It was probably for the best. Tim hated it when adults talked about him like he wasn’t there, like he was a pet or a piece of furniture that needed to be seen to. And he didn’t like the thought of having to explain why he was upset, so it was okay if Clark didn’t ask.

Clark didn’t ask. Instead, as they walked, he said, “How do you feel about pigs-in-a-blanket?”

Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

> Bruce makes it through the party. Barely. He and Tim brace for what comes next.
>
> *He shook another exec's hand and imagined yanking him forward by the wrist, knocking their foreheads together. A punch to the gut to knock the wind out of him. Kick out his right knee. Slam a fist into the left side of his head. Roundhouse kick to put him on his back.*
>
> *"Quite a grip you've got there, Bruce," the executive said with an uneasy chuckle.*

The speech went off without a hitch. Bruce almost wished it didn't.

It'd been a long time since he felt nostalgic for the early days that had immediately followed his return to Gotham, but tonight he thought maybe he'd taken his reputation for granted back then. Back then, nobody expected him to even show up at events like this, let alone pull off a gracious speech on behalf of his company. Back then, he could get away with suddenly disappearing and blowing off responsibilities with half-baked explanations that came well after the fact. Back then, his erratic behaviour could be waved away or written off with ease.

But then the narrative around him changed— he'd *grown up* and *settled down.* That wasn't accidental: it was the direct result of specific changes in his publicly observed behaviour that had started when Dick came to live with him. As much as Bruce probably could have gotten away with being a rich idiot who'd acquired—and somehow been allowed to keep—a child, Bruce really didn't want to be. Dick, he'd decided, deserved better than that, and what he later learned about Jason's early years only strengthened his conviction that this had been the right call. He owed it to the boys, he thought, to at least be perceived as a mostly capable guardian, to give them that one small piece of security in their new home. (Not to mention the risks to Batman associated with an investigation if the State had reason to doubt he was fit to be their guardian.) So, Bruce had chosen to shed part of his carefully crafted public persona, transforming Brucie Wayne from a playboy who lived for champagne-fuelled yacht parties to a dim-witted but largely adequate businessman. Most days, he regretted nothing about this choice.

Today was not most days. Today, he found himself thinking about how the former Bruce Wayne would have handled the need to get out of this party as fast as humanly possible in order to deal with a crisis. He would have staggered through the ballroom, drawing stares, then wandered into the rose garden, past the podium on the band's dais where he was expected to stand, and maybe even fallen into some bushes. After someone helped him up, Brucie would have grinned stupidly through an apology, thanked everyone for coming, and announced that he had to pee, like, *so* bad.

And that would have been that. His guests would laugh and throw their hands in the air because *What can you do?*, and nobody would ask any questions about why he didn't return. Meanwhile, Batman would be downstairs or downtown or in space— wherever he needed to be to deal with the problem at hand.

Unfortunately, Bruce Wayne couldn't do things like that anymore. He was *more mature* and *respectable* now. Even more unfortunately, the problem at hand this time couldn't be solved by Batman.

He turned that thought over and over as he delivered the speech. As he raised his glass for a toast. As he applauded the hard-working catering staff who'd taken such good care of them all night. And after, as he shook more than a dozen hands— the WE Board of Directors, his fellow executives, and leaders from client, collaborator, and even competitor firms. The entire time that he smiled and listened and thanked people for coming, all he could think was, *This isn't a Batman problem.*

He wished it was. He knew how to handle Batman problems. Especially Batman problems that made him this fucking angry.

He could feel it now, the way he'd felt in the moment, before he put it aside to focus on Tim, the higher priority. Now that Tim was elsewhere, the anger was returning like an urgent knock at the back of his mind. And sometime in the last half hour, Bruce discovered that he had cracked open the door.

They were *here.* They'd come to his party without anyone knowing, and they'd gone into *his home.* They'd broken the rules—not just the custody arrangement, but the rules of decorum and decency—to ambush Tim at a time when he thought he was alone, in a place where he should have been safe.

And for what? To mess with his head? To tell him that he was a pawn

in a larger game? To make him think that his only value lay in their ability to use him to one-up *big, important* Bruce Wayne? When the only big, important person their life ought to have been Tim?

Bruce wasn't just angry. He was furious.

He shook another exec's hand and imagined yanking him forward by the wrist, cracking their foreheads together. A punch to the gut to knock the wind out of him. Kick out his right knee. Slam a fist into the left side of his head. Roundhouse kick to put him on his back.

"Quite a grip you've got there, Bruce," the executive said with an uneasy chuckle.

"Sorry!" Brucie exclaimed, letting go. "I've recently started a Pilates class, and it's done wonders. Some days I don't even know my own strength!"

He watched the man's eyes and noted the exact second that he realized Bruce Wayne was dumber than he'd expected. It made Bruce a little nostalgic again and even more eager to leave. Unfortunately, there were still a number of people trying to catch his eye. So he kept smiling and shaking hands, participating in idle chit-chat while he quieted his anger and let his mind return to reviewing the facts.

Chances were good that he'd have to explain this incident to Lillian—and soon. He knew that he wasn't going to come off in the best light, given the mistake with the guest list. He should have checked. He knew—he *knew*—that the Drakes were exactly the kind of people who'd normally be invited to an event like this. And with no one at WE knowing about Tim's existence, it wouldn't have set off any red flags for anyone else. Tim's excuse that his parents had never once attended the Garden Party was cold comfort. Bruce should have checked. He should have explored every possible contingency, and he didn't. He'd failed. He'd failed Tim. Again.

His CFO was looking at him expectantly, and Bruce realized he'd missed a punchline. He let out a startled "Oh!" like he just got the joke and gave an airy laugh. Too late, but everyone around him relaxed, and the conversation moved on.

So, he'd failed, and he wasn't looking forward to having to account for that to Tim's case worker. He hoped his quick intervention would count for something. At the same time, however, he hoped that said intervention hadn't been *too* quick, because that was bound to raise eyebrows, too.

Thank god for Clark, he thought as a server brought around a tray of drinks— cocktails this time, an exclusive treat for the WE C-Suite. She met his eye and indicated with a nod which gin-and-tonic had no gin; his staff were the only people at these parties who knew he didn't drink. He nodded back and took the glass, smiling as he sipped the bitter soda water.

Thank god for Clark. Clark had been— well, Bruce wasn't exactly sure where he'd been, but he'd managed to find enough privacy to speak into the comm, low and urgent.

"Bruce. Tim's parents are here. Sounds like they surprised him. Are they allowed to see him?"

The news blind-sided him. It was absolutely the last thing that Bruce had expected to hear Clark say. The party had been going well—in retrospect, *too* well—even though Sebastian Cronin had disappeared partway through and Bruce's experiment of putting LexCorp staff face-to-face with AJ didn't seem to be producing any results. An interruption by the Drakes was not on his radar at all. (Though it should have been.)

"No," Bruce had mumbled without activating the comm, barely moving his lips. He knew Clark was listening.

"Foyer of the family wing. Top of the stairs."

Bruce was striding through the ballroom before Clark even finished speaking. He forced his face to keep smiling and his legs not to run as his mind sped through possible scenarios. Why they were here didn't matter in that moment. He just needed to get them gone. He had to get Tim away from the Drakes, and he had to see the Drakes escorted discreetly from the premises. Immediately.

But he needed a plausible excuse for alerting security— *my best friend's superhuman abilities* was a perfectly reasonable thing for Batman to say, but not Bruce Wayne. He couldn't cause a scene, as much as he wanted to; none of his guests knew he was fostering a child and, aside from Clark, Alfred, and Shondra, no one here knew who Tim was.

He signalled two security guards to follow him towards the foyer and turned to face them just outside the door that separated the public wing from the family wing. It was roped off with red stanchions and, if that wasn't enough, the door itself had a sign that read *Do not enter* in elegant but clearly legible script.

“Someone just told me they spotted a couple come through here,” Bruce told the guards. “It’s probably nothing, but will you come with me to check it out?”

“Of course, Mr. Wayne,” said one guard, holding up the red velvet rope for him.

“I didn’t see anything,” said the other. Bruce wasn’t too distracted to notice that he was lying, and made a mental note to deal with that later.

His only comfort was that Jack and Janet probably wouldn’t hurt Tim physically. Tim was likely not in any immediate danger— not that stopped Bruce from following his instincts the second he was through that door.

Dick called it the Running Bat Scoop (because of course he did). But whatever the maneuver was called, Bruce had charged up those stairs like a man on a mission and lifted Tim up into his arms without a second thought.

It wasn’t, technically, the first time. He’d almost done a Standing Bat Scoop weeks ago, on the night that Tim snuck out of the manor. One awkward redirect later, and Tim probably thought he had some kind of inner ear imbalance. Oh, well.

Just a few more hands to shake now. One of them—*ugh*—was Clark’s nemesis from Goth Corp Agricultural. She was getting closer, her shoulders straightening; she really wanted to tell him something, and Bruce *really* didn’t have time for her.

He twisted his head like someone called his name in the opposite direction and raised a hand in surprise to wave. “I’m so sorry, excuse me,” he told the ghoul from Goth Corp. “I’ve just got to catch him before he leaves.”

Bruce turned his back on her while she was still making disappointed sounds and cut through the party, smiling like he would love to stop and chat with everyone, he just had to get to one particular person first.

He made it all the way through the ballroom using this trick, then ducked into the kitchen when no eyes were on him.

A dishwasher did a double-take as he came through the door. Bruce

smiled back at him, half in pure relief, and walked deeper into the kitchen. Alfred was nowhere in sight, and neither were Clark or Tim. Bruce wondered for a second if they'd returned to the family wing. Then he heard them—well, he heard *Tim*—near the walk-in freezer.

"Bullshit!" Tim exclaimed, but he was laughing. Bruce paused before rounding the corner, curious.

"Would I lie to you, Tim?" asked Clark in his best *Scout's honour, sir* voice. It had taken Bruce nearly three months of working with him to learn that that voice, when not directed at civilians, was not to be trusted.

To his credit, Tim didn't. "I met you, like, an hour ago, Clark," he said. "I don't know you well enough yet to know."

"Then I'll tell you. I'm not lying," said Clark, lying. He paused, then layered even more kindness on, adding, "You can take it back. I'll let you."

There was a beat of silence. Then— "Nope," Tim declared. "I said what I said. Bullshit. Flip it over."

Clark groaned, and Tim—there was no other word for it—cackled. "I knew it!"

"So many cards," Clark complained.

"Justice is served," said Tim. There was a *flick*— a paper playing card laid down on a flat surface. "Six."

"Now, I *know* that's BS because I have all the sixes," Clark pointed out. "Pick it up, buddy."

It was Tim's turn to groan. Bruce rounded the corner a second later. Clark, of course, had known he was there the entire time and didn't look surprised, but Tim sat up a little straighter when Bruce appeared, his expression dimming just enough to notice.

"Who's winning?" Bruce asked with a smile that it took Tim a second to return.

"Isn't it obvious?" Clark grumbled, manipulating the comically huge number of cards he was trying to hang onto. "Tim's BS detector is a little too good."

“Maybe you’re a terrible liar,” Bruce countered.

“Also possible,” Clark conceded, “but my pride would rather believe that Tim is just a Bullshit prodigy.”

Tim made a face, Bruce opened his mouth, and Clark turned red. “I heard it as soon as I said it,” he added. “You know what I mean.”

Bruce chuckled. “Thank you?” said Tim, sounding like he was guessing. “I think there’s a compliment in there.”

“Definitely,” Clark agreed with a grin.

He glanced up at Bruce, asking. When Bruce nodded, Clark arranged his cards into a pile and tapped the bottom edge on their wobbly card table— it was a wooden TV tray with one leg that was too short. Bruce wasn’t sure where it had come from.

While Clark wrangled his cards, Tim picked up the third hand they’d dealt onto the table to make the game more interesting and shuffled his own cards into it, then laid the much smaller pile on top of Clark’s.

Clark reached across the tiny table and shook Tim’s hand. “Well, thank you for letting me relive my high school days,” he said. “I can’t tell you how many spare periods I spent playing BS in the cafeteria.”

“That’s because you lived in Kansas,” Bruce felt obligated to point out.

“Card games *were* the height of entertainment,” said Clark. “Aside from the annual tractor pull, of course.” To Tim, he added, “Well played, but I’ll get you next time.”

Tim grinned back at him. “Only if you learn how to bluff between now and then.”

Clark huffed a laugh and got to his feet. He swung towards Bruce and spoke too low for Tim to hear: “Definitely one of yours.”

Bruce couldn’t stop the small smile that spread across his lips, nor the warmth that Clark’s words set off in the centre of his chest. He also didn’t try very hard to do either.

“Ready to go?” he asked Tim, who was sliding the deck of cards into the box.

“Almost. Just gotta give these back to Celia,” he said, and he set off

towards the stoves. Clark and Bruce followed a step behind.

Tim greeted the head chef in Spanish that was almost as fluid as hers. As they chatted, Bruce turned slightly towards Clark.

“Any trouble?”

“None,” Clark answered.

“He tell you anything?”

“About?”

“What happened with his parents.”

“No. I got the distinct impression that he didn’t want to talk about it.” Clark paused. “Not to me, anyway.”

Bruce could feel Clark’s eyes on him, warm like they carried a trace of heat vision. He nodded, but said nothing.

Tim thanked Celia for the use of the cards, and laughed at her reply that she always took them with her to events like this in case nobody showed up to the party.

“<How often does that happen?>” Tim asked.

Celia’s eyes flitted over to Bruce. “<So far, never. Mr. Wayne is very popular. But still not married. Such a shame.>”

Bruce kept a placid smile on his face—nobody knew how many languages he spoke—and waved when they both glanced over at him. Clark meanwhile, had turned his back, pretending to be interested in the door handle of the walk-in freezer but no doubt trying to hide his silent laughter.

“Gracias,” Tim said again a minute later, this time for letting her practice his Spanish with her.

“De nada,” Celia replied. She smiled warmly and added that he was getting very good, that it was no hardship.

Tim headed over to Bruce, who thanked Celia and her staff in English before escorting Tim from the kitchen.

“Sounds like things are wrapping up,” said Clark, glancing towards the ballroom, which was now much emptier.

“Yeah,” Bruce told him. “AJ left right after my speech, and I think your other friend did, too.”

“I’ll take a look around, see if I can spot him before I go,” said Clark, and Bruce nodded, grateful that he’d understood he was talking about Dr. Cronin.

“Thank you for coming, Clark,” Bruce told him sincerely, shaking his hand and pulling him in for a quick one-armed hug.

“Any time,” Clark replied. Then to Tim, he said, “Nice to meet you, Tim. Thanks again for the game. You’re one of the best bullshitters I know.”

Bruce *tsk*ed. “Clark.”

“Bullshit,” said Tim with a grin.

Bruce *tsk*ed. *“Tim.”*

“Here,” said Clark, handing Bruce a ten-dollar bill. “That should cover us. But let Alfred know he can mail me an invoice if not.”

“Oh, he will,” Bruce promised, taking the money. Clark grinned and waved before heading through to the ballroom and back into the dwindling party. Tim and Bruce waved back, then turned the opposite direction.

“Did you have fun?” Bruce asked as they headed towards the family wing. He realized as soon as he heard it that it was a dumb question, but Tim didn’t seem to mind.

“Yeah,” he answered. It sounded like he was thinking about something. “Clark doesn’t swear a lot, does he?”

“Almost never,” said Bruce, surprised. “Why do you ask?”

Tim shrugged. “Every time he said bull— uh, BS—”

“On Alfred’s behalf, thank you,” Bruce cut in.

“He said it like he knew he wasn’t supposed to.”

“Maybe he was afraid Alfred would show up and wash his mouth out with soap.”

Tim huffed a laugh but shook his head. “He reminded me of a little

kid, breaking the rules. Or an AP student skipping class for the first time." His eyes darted sideways quickly. "Uh. Not that I'd know anything about that."

"Of course not," Bruce agreed smoothly. He smirked, hoping that Clark was listening. "So, what you're saying is, he's kinda square."

Tim snorted. "What decade are you from? Nobody says 'square' anymore."

"I think it's 1940s slang," Bruce mused. Tim looked over at him again. "That's not better, is it?"

"No." Tim typed on his phone as they passed through the door that led to the foyer of the family wing. Tim's phone buzzed in his hand as they neared the stairs, but he ignored it, reading something on the screen.

"The 1570s?!" he exclaimed a second later.

"I'm not *that* old," Bruce said quickly.

"Unless you're a vampire."

"I'm not a vampire."

"Sounds like something a vampire would say, Bruce."

Bruce chuckled. *There have been rumours,* he thought about saying. But those rumours were about Batman, not about Bruce Wayne. If anyone else was ribbing him about his age, he might have said something. Anyone close enough to make jabs like that already knew. Tim was an anomaly on that front—he was the first person in a long time to get close without knowing the truth—and Bruce had to be careful.

It suddenly occurred to him just how much Tim was joking around, and how wide his smile had been since Clark left. All at once, Bruce remembered he wasn't the only one who knew how to wear a mask when it suited him.

He stopped Tim at the top of the stairs with a light touch to his shoulder. "Hey," he said. "Before we talk to Lillian, is there anything — uh. Just wondering how you're doing."

Tim's expression cracked. It didn't fully give way, but the surface splintered like the top layer of a pond that had thawed and re-frozen

many times.

“I— I’m okay,” he said. Bruce waited. More fractures appeared in Tim’s smile. “I guess… I’m worried.”

“About?”

“What happens now.”

Bruce nodded slowly. “Me, too,” he let himself admit.

“Do you think you’ll get in trouble?”

Bruce frowned, remembering how Tim refused to let the police drive him back to Wayne Manor after the robbery at the shoe store a couple weeks ago. “Don’t worry about that,” he said, hoping to soothe Tim’s anxiety.

It didn’t work. “This is all my fault,” Tim said.

“No,” Bruce replied immediately. “Tim, it’s really not. Clark and Alfred were right: your parents broke the rules.”

“But—”

Bruce got straight to the point. “I know you want to protect them,” he said. “Yes, they chose to come to the party because you’re here, but that doesn’t make it your fault. And it’s not your responsibility to shield them from the consequences of their choices. Or to shield me, for that matter.”

Tim had dropped his gaze, seeming to focus on something at the bottom of the stairs. He shook his head, and Bruce felt another wave of anger. There were a lot of things he wanted to say about Jack and Janet and this whole situation, but he bit them back. Tim needed to know that he was on his side, even if they disagreed.

“It’s not fair,” Tim mumbled towards the stairs.

Well. They could agree on that.

Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

Bruce and Tim talk to Lillian about what just happened at the Garden Party.

“Hi Bruce, hi Tim,” Lillian said brightly. “I’m just leaving the office, but I’ve got a few minutes. What’s up?”

Bruce drew a deep breath. “Well,” he said, and he told her.

Lillian’s cheerful demeanour disappeared almost at once.

Chapter Notes

Friendly reminder that I know nothing about how a Child Services program would actually function. Also, we are in the world of make-believe! DC writers don't care about things like this, so why should I? That is not the point of this story. We're going for plausible with some suspension of disbelief here— I'm making Child Services operate the way I need it to operate in order to tell the story I want to tell. If that bothers you, or if you are an expert in this area and you get mad that I'm not being accurate, well, dem's the breaks, I guess.

Bruce led them down the hall into his study. He glanced at his watch before pulling his phone out of his pocket. It was nearly 8; he’d have to call Lillian on her cell phone. He sank onto the antique yellow settee against the wall opposite his desk, but Tim stayed standing, his eyes roving around the room.

Bruce recalled what Alfred had told him a few weeks ago about Tim sneaking in here; he’d been concerned, but only mildly. He himself used to sneak into his father’s office, and into Alfred’s quarters as well. Kids were just nosey sometimes. And Bruce was careful; the entrance to the Batcave was well-hidden and well-protected. However, with that being said...

“That clock’s been in my family for four generations,” he said, noticing how Tim was staring.

“It doesn’t work,” Tim pointed out.

“No,” Bruce sighed. “But it’s massive, and it’s old, and it’s fragile, so

Alfred won't let me try and move it out of here, either. Want to sit? I figured we would put Lillian on speaker."

"Yeah," said Tim, pulling his eyes away from the clock.

The settee wasn't big, and it wasn't very comfortable, but it was better than being at his desk like he was a school principal about to reprimand someone. Bruce selected Lillian's cell number and hit the green icon to call her. Tim sat down beside him, looking miserable. Bruce hesitated, then put an arm around his shoulder.

After three and a half rings, Lillian picked up. "Hello?"

"Lillian, hi, it's Bruce Wayne. I've got Tim here with me. Is this a good time?"

"Hi Bruce, hi Tim," Lillian said brightly. "I'm just leaving the office, but I've got a few minutes. What's up?"

Bruce drew a deep breath. "Well," he said, and he told her.

Lillian's cheerful demeanour disappeared almost at once. He could hear her typing by the time he finished his barebones account of what happened, and he felt a twinge of guilt at prolonging her workday.

When he tried to apologize, however, she brushed it off. "Don't worry about it, Bruce. Tim, are you still there?"

Tim started in surprise under Bruce's arm. "Yeah, I'm here."

"Is it okay if I talk to you alone for a minute?"

Tim twisted to look up at Bruce, who nodded and pulled away. "I'll step outside. Just open the door when you want me to come back."

"Okay," said Tim, looking pale but determined.

Bruce wanted to say something encouraging as he walked away, but Tim switched the phone off speaker and held it to his ear. As Bruce was closing the door, he said, "Okay, it's just me now."

Bruce was unsurprised to find Alfred at the end of the hall by the back stairs, setting a tray down on a small table that sat in an alcove. Once upon a time, that table had housed an antique vase of porcelain flowers, but it had mysteriously disappeared one weekend while Bruce was off on a last-minute Justice League mission and Alfred was enjoying a rare vacation. Neither Dick nor Jason claimed to know

anything about the vase's whereabouts, but a section of upstairs surveillance footage was also missing and so were a couple of batarangs. It was circumstantial evidence— not enough to convict, but enough to close the case.

"I thought some refreshments would not go amiss," said Alfred, handing him a cup of tea. There was also a glass of milk on the tray for Tim, since he hated tea, and a platter of leftover hors d'oeuvres and desserts from the party.

"Thank you," Bruce said genuinely. He sipped the tea and tried to let it soothe him. "Tim's talking to Lillian now."

Alfred's eyes darted to the closed door down the hall. He spoke quietly. "Have you decided on an explanation?"

Bruce knew what he was asking. "Keeping it simple and close to the truth," he replied, matching Alfred's tone. "Someone—unfortunately I just can't remember who—told me they saw a couple of people going through a door they weren't supposed to. I alerted security, and they accompanied me to look into it."

Alfred nodded, but his expression was grave. "And the truth?"

"The invitation was sent by mistake, but..." He told Alfred about the guard who was lying. "I think they likely bribed him to let them through."

Alfred's lips were compressed into a thin line. Bruce picked up a lemon square and popped it in his mouth. He watched Alfred's fingers straighten the platter afterwards as if he'd knocked it askew rather than nudging it just a handful of millimetres. He washed the dessert down with a mouthful of tea, but still Alfred didn't speak.

"You're angry," Bruce concluded.

Alfred raised his head sharply. Bruce knew he was right.

"I am, too," he said. He drew in a breath and let it out slowly, his eyes hovering on the closed door to his study. "If that makes you feel better."

"As a matter of fact it does," said Alfred, his voice surprisingly unsteady. "If you're angry, it means you'll make sure this never happens again."

“You’re damn right I will,” Bruce promised. He reached into his pocket and pulled out Clark’s ten-dollar bill. As he placed it on the tray, the study door opened behind him.

Alfred took his teacup just as Tim said, “Bruce?”

“Right here,” said Bruce, already three steps down the hall. He entered the study again, and re-joined Tim on the small, uncomfortable settee. Tim already had the phone back on speaker and was holding it out between them, his body angled like he didn’t want Bruce looking at him, but it was too late. Bruce had seen that his eyes were red-rimmed again, his cheeks pink and blotchy.

“Hi, Lillian,” Bruce said, torn between wanting to comfort Tim and wanting to respect his wishes. He remembered, too well, how it felt to be a teenaged boy and embarrassed to be seen crying.

“Hi, Bruce. Do I have your consent to record this portion of the call?”

“Sure,” said Bruce, though he was apprehensive.

“Thanks. I need a few more details from both of you for my report,” Lillian replied. “Bruce, Tim told me that his parents ended up on the guest list for your party by accident?”

“Yes, it was a mistake,” Bruce confirmed. “I take full responsibility.”

Tim shook his head. “They get invited every year but they’ve never once showed up. It’s not his fault.”

“I still should have checked,” Bruce countered gently. He reached out and squeezed Tim’s shoulder, embarrassment be damned. “I’m sorry.”

Tim squirmed out from under his arm. Bruce frowned.

“Okay,” said Lillian, neutral. “And Tim, you chose not to attend the party, so you were upstairs reading while everything was going on?”

“He didn’t leave me home alone,” said Tim defensively.

Bruce blinked as the pieces fell into place. Was that what Tim was so worried about? That Bruce would get accused of the same kind of neglect that his parents did? Bruce could see the similarities—or, he could see the ways that Tim might think the situations were similar—but would Lillian agree? He hoped not.

“And even if he did,” Tim went on, “I’m fifteen now, so it’s not—”

“I know,” Lillian cut in, patient and gentle. Bruce got the impression that this was a repeat of a conversation they’d had on their own.

“Alfred and I were in the public wing of the manor,” Bruce explained. “Not far, and available at a moment’s notice via call or text message.”

“I know,” Lillian said again. “I just need to get a clear sequence of events.”

“Okay,” Bruce said. Tim shook his head again but didn’t protest.

“So, Bruce was in another part of the house, and Tim, you were upstairs by yourself?”

“Yes,” Tim confirmed, sullen and robotic.

“You were reading, and you heard voices downstairs?”

“Yes,” Tim repeated.

“What happened then?”

“I didn’t recognize their voices at first,” Tim recounted. “I thought maybe Bruce was giving someone a tour, so I stepped out of my room and went to the top of the stairs to see what was going on.”

“Okay. And meanwhile, Bruce, you were…?”

“Just inside the ballroom,” Bruce supplied. “A guest told me they saw two people go through a door that said *Do not enter*. I assumed it was someone who just got lost and went with a couple members of my security team to check it out.”

“But when you got there, you saw it was Mr. and Mrs. Drake.”

“Yes, that’s right,” said Bruce. “They were at the top of the stairs, talking to Tim.”

“And you then confronted them?”

“He didn’t yell at them,” Tim cut in. “They didn’t get into a fight or anything.”

“Tim, it’s okay,” Bruce said, reaching out again. Tim went stock-still when his hand touched his arm, but he didn’t pull away again. “I’ll admit I probably raised my voice,” Bruce told Lillian. “I was just so surprised and— and a little upset, that they would do that.”

“He told them it wasn’t okay that they were there, and he asked them to leave,” Tim explained. “He was actually really nice about it.”

“And your security guards escorted them off the premises a minute later,” Lillian summarized, letting Tim’s words go without comment.

“That’s right,” said Bruce.

“And all this happened approximately an hour ago?”

Bruce checked his watch. “A little more than an hour ago now, but yeah.”

“Okay.”

“I asked him to wait,” said Tim. “He didn’t put it off or anything. It’s not like he wanted to hide it from you.”

“Tim,” Bruce started, but Lillian spoke at the same time.

“I know,” she said, with that same gentle patience. “You already told me that when we spoke privately, and I believe you, Tim. I just need to get the facts straight for the report.”

“Lillian’s just doing her job, Tim,” Bruce agreed.

Tim set his jaw and turned his face away. Bruce exhaled a long breath through his nose.

“Anything else you need, Lillian?” he asked.

“Yes, I’d like some details about the event signage, just to make it crystal clear.”

“Of course,” said Bruce, and he rattled off the information she needed, answering a few more questions. Tim shifted restlessly beside him.

Finally, she said, “I think that’s it. I’m stopping the recording. Tim, I need to talk to Bruce alone now, okay?”

Tim’s wide eyes landed on Bruce. “It’s fine,” Bruce murmured, taking the phone from his hand.

Lillian was still talking. “I’ll connect with you soon, Tim. Take care, okay? Goodnight.”

“Alfred’s got some snacks in the hall,” Bruce told him, getting to his

feet and offering Tim a hand when he didn't immediately stand up with him.

Tim swallowed hard, stood up without Bruce's help, and crossed the room to step out into the hall. Bruce closed the door behind him, waited a second or two, then switched the phone off speaker again and held it to his ear.

"Just me now," he said, walking back towards the window.

Lillian let out a long, audible sigh. "How are you doing, Bruce?"

"Honestly?" He assessed himself in the reflection of the glass. "Not great. I'm angry with myself for letting this happen. I should have checked that damn guest list."

Lillian didn't say anything, which Bruce took as agreement.

"But even more so, I'm worried about Tim," Bruce went on. "Seeing his parents really upset him tonight."

"I got that impression," said Lillian. "At least they only talked to him for a few minutes before you got there."

A few minutes too long, Bruce almost said. "Did he tell you what they said to him?"

Lillian hesitated. "In confidence," she answered. Bruce grimaced and nodded.

"So what happens now?" he asked.

"Well, officially, you're under investigation. Unofficially, I can tell you it will be an extremely short investigation, because anyone who has eyes can tell who's in the wrong here. The Drakes being on your guest list was a mistake, yes, but even without knowing that they'd be in attendance, you made every reasonable effort to ensure Tim's safety. Between the signs, the stanchions, and your security personnel, you had no reason to think Tim wouldn't be safe from any unwelcome visitors, let alone his parents."

Bruce nodded, though part of his mind was already devising new security measures that would be implemented going forward.

"So I wouldn't worry too much about that," Lillian concluded. "The State will clear you, and the Drakes will be penalized for breaking the

rules of the custody arrangement. But you also have the option of pressing charges yourself, if you'd like."

"Trespassing?" Bruce guessed.

"Mm," Lillian agreed. "Maybe more. I'm not a lawyer."

"Sounds like you're saying I should call mine," Bruce remarked.

"I would," said Lillian, perfectly serious.

"Noted."

There was a moment of tense silence over the line before Lillian spoke again. "He kept asking if we were gonna send him to a new home."

Bruce's throat went tight. "Is there a risk of that?"

"Officially, yes," said Lillian, matter-of-fact.

Bruce blinked several times before he could ask. His reflection blurred dangerously. "And... unofficially?"

"Unofficially, it will be a cold day in hell before I take Tim away from you."

Bruce let out a breath. "Okay," he barely heard himself say.

"This is the longest he's stayed anywhere," Lillian went on. "And, in case it hasn't been obvious from our check-ins, I can tell you this is the best I've seen him since I took over his case. He's doing well, he has friends, his grades are going up again. And..."

Bruce swiped a hand under his eyes while she gathered her thoughts.

"And remember what I said, the first time he came to Wayne Manor?"

Bruce did. "He's not used to trusting people."

"I think that's changing, Bruce. Little by little."

Why do you even care? Bruce heard Tim say again. *It'd be easier if you didn't.*

Tim was too young to know that, too young to have learned that cutting himself off was safer, easier. Too young to be so jaded, to keep his walls so high. But...

But Bruce remembered that day in Metropolis, when Tim ran away from the penthouse. Bruce saw Tim's questioning eyes staring up at him in the summer sun.

Why did you find me? he'd asked, like it was so unfeasible that someone in this kid's life gave a damn.

There'd been tears in those eyes that day at the park, but they hadn't fallen until his face was buried in Bruce's shoulder. Later, Bruce had touched the faint stains on the fabric to remind himself that they were real, that this kid—who'd been alone so long he soothed himself after nightmares and ran out into an unknown city when he felt trapped—had trusted Bruce enough to be vulnerable, even if he couldn't look at him in that moment.

Tonight, he did. Tonight, he'd cried in plain sight and yelled in Bruce's face and asked him more heartbreaking questions that Bruce struggled to answer.

I care because I care, he wished he'd said. Like *I found you because you needed finding.* It was simple. It was true.

"I think so, too," Bruce confessed.

"So," Lillian said after a beat, a little louder than she needed to.

"So," Bruce agreed.

"So, talk to your lawyer, find out your options," Lillian reiterated. "I'll work things from my end, and you should be hearing from me soon. Okay?"

"Okay. Thank you," Bruce told her sincerely.

"It's what I'm here for," said Lillian. "Take care, Bruce. And take care of Tim. I have a feeling the next few days might be a little rough."

"I have a feeling you're right," said Bruce.

They hung up a moment later, but it took Bruce a few minutes to go to the door and re-open it. When he did, he found Tim and Alfred sitting in the hall—Tim on the floor, Alfred on a folding chair—just two doors down. The tray that Alfred had brought was on the floor beside Tim, but glass of milk was still full, and nothing but the lemon square that Bruce had eaten earlier was gone.

Tim's head shot up, Alfred looked over, and Bruce gave them both a tired smile. He walked over to stand between them, rested his back against the wall and slid down to join Tim on the floor. His suit jacket rumpled weirdly under him—his dry cleaner wouldn't be happy with him—but he just undid the buttons so it wasn't uncomfortable.

As he did, movement on his left caught his eye. Alfred was silently getting to his feet, folding the chair, and carrying it away. Bruce watched him leave with a faint sense of trepidation, then turned to his right and caught Tim staring.

"There will be an investigation into what happened tonight," Bruce said, answering the unasked question. Tim opened his mouth to argue, but Bruce pressed on. "Lillian is confident that the State will rule in our favour. And you'll be staying here until it's over."

The news didn't cause the relief that Bruce was hoping it would. Tim looked pale, almost clammy. Bruce stopped himself from touching Tim's forehead to check his temperature.

"That's not fair," Tim said. "I tried to tell her. You didn't do anything, there's no reason they should investigate you."

"It's standard procedure for something like this," Bruce tried to reassure him.

"Something like this," Tim repeated under his breath. "Something like this *never* happened with—"

He cut himself off and looked away, his cheeks darkening. Bruce heard the rest of that sentence, even though it wasn't spoken. And Tim was wrong: something like this *had* happened with Dick and Jason— a few times. In the early days when Dick was living here, and of course after Bruce came back from Ethiopia.

Bruce could tell him about those times; it might be a comfort. To Tim, not to himself. It wasn't something he talked about.

"It's not fair that they're investigating you because of me," Tim said, changing direction in light of the awkward silence.

"It's not because of you," Bruce reminded him, relieved to be back on stable ground. "It's because I made a mistake and because your parents made a decision."

"But if I wasn't so curious— if I didn't go out to see who it was, then

they wouldn't have seen me," Tim protested. "They would have thought I wasn't home, and then they would have left."

Bruce smiled patiently. "Okay," he said. "But... if my security guard hadn't walked away from the stanchions, your parents wouldn't have gotten into the family wing. Or if Alfred was out front to greet people as they arrived, then they wouldn't have gotten through the door in the first place. If I'd reviewed the guest list, they wouldn't have received an invite. And if I'd decided to cancel the party altogether, then *none* of this would have happened."

Tim said nothing, but Bruce could tell he was listening.

"How far back do you want to go?" Bruce asked, not unkindly. "Trust me, son, you can go forever if you let yourself. But you're never gonna find it."

"Find... what?" asked Tim, frowning uncertainly.

"The source," Bruce answered. "The origin, the reason. The root of it all. The point in the path where everything changed. The one thing you could have done differently to avoid the pain you're in right now."

"I'm not— I'm fine," said Tim.

Bruce held up an arm anyway, in offer. Tim stared at him a second longer, then slid a little closer. Bruce closed the gap, meeting him in the middle. He clasped the top of Tim's opposite shoulder and held him close.

"Whatever happens now—to me, to your parents—it's not your fault, Tim," Bruce told him. "Try and remember that, okay?"

Tim didn't disagree, but he didn't agree, either. He didn't nod, or say another word at all.

Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

The Garden Party's immediate aftermath.

Finally, Tim got a closed door between them. He waited for the (no doubt intentional) sound of Bruce walking away. Then he leaned against the door and raised one shaking hand to his forehead.

Chapter Notes

Hi, so, this is late.

I had several chapters written prior to posting Chapter 45 back in (oh god) September, but I hit a wall and realized that 1) a plot element I was going to introduce REALLY wasn't working, and 2) Tim's post-Garden Party feels are, like, so incredibly messy, and I wasn't diving into them enough to do the story justice. (Hence: wall.) So, I had to scrap something like 20,000 words and start over (D:) but the fic is much better for it.

Updates will not be regular, sad to say. I'm still rewriting and reworking things, trying to get it right. We're in the third act now, and there are a lot of elements that need to be sorted into neat piles and tied into pretty bows, and, yes, that's a mixed metaphor. Also, not to be an AO3 stereotype but life keeps getting in the way of writing (>:|). I got a new job that on paper seems likely to give me a better work-life (work-fandom) balance, but we'll see. Capitalism is still capitalism, and it still really fucking sucks.

But I had to post something today. Today, December 13th, is the 2-year anniversary of Chapter 1. (AO3 says it's tomorrow, but that's just a time zone thing.) Two years ago today, I'd just started a different new job, and I'd fallen into a new branch of fandom, and started writing something that was supposed to rather short and light and fun, about CPTSD!Tim giving good parent!Bruce grey hairs. Who knew I'd be on Chapter 46 of an emotional rollercoaster and case fic two years later? I didn't. I often have no idea what the fuck I'm doing.

Anyway. Thank you to everyone who's reading, and everyone who's left comments. Apologies if I haven't replied/if I reply really late. Even good things get overwhelming sometimes. Know that I

see every comment and kudos, and they keep me going. So thank you, and here's to two years!

Love,
MrsD

Bruce walked with him to his room later, when Tim lied and said that he wanted to go to bed.

The truth was he just wanted to be alone. So much had happened. So much had changed. It felt like years since he explored Bruce's study, searching for the Batcave entrance. Looking back at that now gave him the same feeling he'd normally get remembering something that he'd done in the second grade— an embarrassed sense of disbelief that asked, *How could I have ever been so young and stupid?*

They reached his bedroom door and stopped. Bruce still had that expression on his face, the one that had been there since they went upstairs to call Lillian. It was barely-hidden worry, and it hurt to look at. Tim didn't want Bruce to worry; Tim didn't want Batman to have anything to worry about. But he did, and Tim knew why.

"Well, goodnight," he said, awkward.

Bruce hesitated, then moved, pulling Tim in for another hug that was tighter and went on longer than usual. Tim closed his eyes, remembering how safe these arms had felt just a couple hours ago at the top of the stairs. Now? Now, the embrace felt dangerous, like one or both of them had an explosive vest strapped to his chest.

"Goodnight, s-son," said Bruce. Tim turned to stone.

The first time had been an accident. Tim knew because the word came out too smooth. This time, that tiny stutter told Tim that Bruce was doing it on purpose.

No, he wanted to shout. *Don't call me that. Don't* do *that, not when I caused this, not when I put everything at risk.*

"Goodnight, Bruce," he managed to say instead, as he extracted himself from the embrace.

He got his bedroom door open, but before he could step inside Bruce spoke again. "Come get me if you need anything, okay? If you want to talk again, or— or anything. No matter how late it is. I'm here."

That's exactly the problem, Tim thought, remembering how Bruce once told him it was his job to worry about him.

But he was too tired to argue. "Goodnight," he said again.

Bruce echoed him, and, finally, Tim got a closed door between them. He waited for the (no doubt intentional) sound of Bruce walking away. Then he leaned against the door and raised one shaking hand to his forehead.

He wanted to cry. He wanted to scream. He wanted to climb out the window and down the nearest tree, hit the ground, start running, and never stop.

His parents—

Oh my boy, look at you!

His parents were in trouble. They'd made a decision, as Bruce put it, and now there would be consequences. Lillian told him it was likely they would lose visiting privileges for good, and that this incident would count against them when they finally went to court.

How else were we going to see you?

His parents were working with LexCorp. His parents were on a first-name basis with a man who may have had a hand in four people's deaths in the last year, a man who made deals with Falcone enforcers in broad daylight.

Two birds, you know?

They'd broken the rules to come to the party and see him. They'd broken the rules to come to the party and follow up on a deal with LexCorp.

The sooner we get this deal made to take care of the business, the sooner we can sort out the legal trouble and get you home.

And all of it was for him.

That was what Bruce didn't get, why he could logic out all the hypotheticals he wanted to, but he'd never understand Tim's guilt, Tim's role in this.

And it wasn't like Tim could just *tell* him.

He almost did. Out in the hall, under Bruce's arm, he almost said it: *I know you're Batman. I'm Bug, and my parents are in business with your serial killer.*

But then he'd opened his mouth and lied about wanting to go to bed.

Leaning against the closed door in his empty bedroom now, he decided it wasn't any better to be alone with this. He almost turned around again, almost opened the door, almost stepped out to find Bruce. To tell him everything, to put all his cards on the table, explain it to Batman, and ask for his help. Because he *would* help— Tim knew he would. And if there was one person on the planet who *could,* it was —

I know you want to protect them.

Tim did. Tim had to. Who else was going to do it?

Tim had been protecting his parents for a long time. Forging signatures, telling lies when people asked, keeping stories straight when teachers noticed things that didn't quite add up. And, despite what his parents had accused him of almost a year ago, he *had* tried to keep Mrs. Mac from saying something. He'd told her for years that his parents had hired a nanny who picked him up and stayed with him before and after school and overnight. When she started asking more questions, he messed up one of the spare bedrooms, bought women's hygiene products to leave in the guest bathroom so it looked like someone was living there. When his parents came home, everything went under his bed. But it wasn't enough. The questions continued.

And the next time his parents disappeared, Mrs. Mac called Child Services.

Tim hadn't seen her since. For the last year and a half, he'd wondered if it was it something he did that caused her to cross that line. Or was it something he'd failed to do— some hole in his carefully crafted web of lies and excuses that he hadn't even noticed?

He slid down to sit on the floor. From here, the room looked different. Messier. He could see just how many rogue socks had travelled under the bed, and how much of his stuff littered the carpet. There was his school bag, unzipped and spilling textbooks. His old beat-up running shoes lay abandoned near the closet door where he'd left them the afternoon Bruce bought him a new pair and didn't judge Tim when he couldn't quite bear to part with the old ones. And his school uniform from earlier today was piled in a corner, exactly the way he'd left it

when he got back to the manor this afternoon and changed into his jeans.

Batman *could* help...

"Can I stay here, after this?" he'd asked Lillian during their private phone call.

"Yes, you'll be staying with Bruce until further notice. Don't worry, okay?"

"You aren't going to— aren't you going to send me somewhere else?"

"Do you want *to go somewhere else, Tim?"*

Did he? Tim's heart gave a painful squeeze. "No," he'd told Lillian. "But —"

"Then I'll do everything I can to keep you where you are," she'd promised.

Tim's eyes stung. Of course he didn't *want* to leave. But what he wanted shouldn't have even been a factor. He was a threat to Bruce— to Batman. He always had been, no matter what Nightwing said about Bug being an ally. And even if Bug *was* helpful, *Tim* wasn't.

Even if Bruce didn't see it. Or maybe he didn't want to see it.

Tim thought about their trip to Metropolis, their conversations about cold cases over dinner between swim class and Spanish conversation group. He thought about Bruce tracking him down in the middle of a park, in the middle of the night. He thought about waffles and ice cream and back-to-school shopping and doctor's appointments and going to the dentist for the first time in almost a year. He thought about *I found you because you needed finding* and *It's yours* and *You will have a home at the manor as long as you want it.* He thought about *I'm proud of you* and *It'll be alright* and *Trust me, son.*

"No," Tim whispered, a tear sliding down his cheek. He *couldn't* trust this. Bruce didn't know the whole story. Bruce didn't know how dangerous it was, having Tim here.

Why did you take me in? Why am I even here? If you didn't know—

He finished the thought this time. *If you didn't know who I am, what I do, the level of threat I could pose to your entire operation? Why take the risk? Why I am worth any of this?*

"I'm not," he said out loud, and his next breath came a little easier.

I'm not, but you can't see that.

Bruce wasn't thinking. He was taking chances, making bad decisions, doing risky things for no reason. Tim wasn't helpless. He wasn't a victim of this city's violence, or a street kid seeking warmth and safety from Gotham's Dark Knight. Tim didn't *need* Bruce to do any of this. It *wasn't* Bruce's job to worry about Tim.

If anything, it was the other way around. This incident with Tim's parents was going to shine a light on Bruce Wayne; if Batman was going to survive this, he needed Tim's help.

Tim looked around at the mess he'd made of this bedroom and remembered how it had looked on his first night here. The bed was too big, the desk too fancy, the view out the large window too perfect, too green. It had felt like a museum exhibit behind glass, or a set from a TV show— stuffy, ornate, elegant. Not built for people. Not built for him. Nevertheless, over the last few months, it had slowly become his. It had become...

No. It couldn't—*wouldn't*—be home. Not once everything began to catch up with him. Not once Bruce knew.

Tim had to fix this. He had no idea how.

He stayed on the floor until his feet and legs started to tingle, until his head and heart felt wrung out like threadbare cloth, and he couldn't form a coherent thought anymore.

Then he got up, turned out the light, and went to sleep in his clothes.

Things felt clearer when his alarm went off the next morning. Not *better*—his head hurt, and his heart pounded when he remembered everything that had happened—but clearer.

He took off last night's wrinkled clothes and put on his pyjamas before grabbing a fresh school uniform from his closet and crossing the hall to the bathroom. His teeth felt disgusting, so he brushed them for twice the usual amount of time. Then he had a shower, combed his too-long hair back out of his eyes, and got dressed.

The foyer was empty when he descended the stairs, but he could hear Alfred humming in the kitchen. Grateful for Bruce's status as a creature of the night, Tim walked over to the black lion statue. The motion sensor was still there. In all the chaos last night, he'd forgotten

about it entirely. He remembered while he was in the shower and nearly had a panic attack.

Now, however, mixed with the relief, Tim felt a touch of concern. Batman should have found it. Batman should have noticed. Batman shouldn't have been so distracted that he didn't see a piece of foreign tech in his own home.

As he stuffed the device in his backpack, Tim had to admit that part of him wished Bruce *had* found it— and not just because it would be proof that Batman's attention wasn't so divided that he was missing the obvious. If Bruce had found the motion sensor and confronted Tim about it, then Tim would have to come clean about Bug. The secret would be out; the decision about whether or not to tell him would be out of his hands for good. It would be a relief... though at what cost, he wasn't sure.

He shook off his thoughts and headed to the kitchen. Alfred greeted him kindly but seemed to sense that Tim wasn't much interested in talking this morning. He kept the conversation sparse as Tim ate his breakfast. Bruce joined them just in time to see Tim off, and if Tim hurried after Alfred towards the garage to avoid being alone with him, well, he tried not to feel too guilty about it.

Gotham's rainy autumn took another day off, so Alfred drove him to Pat's house so they could walk to school together in the golden morning light. The drive was quiet. Tim sipped his second cup of milky half-caf from the ugly plastic travel mug he'd been given the day he began his stay at Wayne Manor.

Pat seemed extra energetic this morning. They were reading the latest novel in an ongoing mystery series and had a lot to say about it. Tim always liked hearing about the story's twists and turns, but this morning he liked it even more because he didn't have to say much, instead just letting the narrative wash over him as they walked.

They met their friends in the quad, as usual. Darla and Bernard were looking at something on Bernard's phone while Callie and Ariana had their hands joined and heads bent close together, whispering. They were either exchanging some kind of lovey-dovey stuff they didn't want the rest of the group to hear, or they were plotting world domination. (It was hard to tell with teenaged girls.) Ives—late as always—ran up after they'd all greeted each other.

Tim mostly stayed quiet, watching and listening while he finished his

coffee. He hadn't told any of them about the party last night—even though some of their parents were probably among the type of people who'd get an invite—and Ives and Pat were still the only ones who knew where he was living. He knew he could talk to one of them about what had happened with his parents, but the thought of doing so filled him with dread. Plus, it was a lot to explain, and the bell was bound to ring soon— there was no time to really get into it.

"You alright, Tim?" Ives asked suddenly. Tim realized the others had separated into their own conversations again.

"Yeah," he replied, dredging up a smile. "Just tired. Friday, you know?"

"Yeah. I get that," said Ives, but Tim could tell he wasn't fully convinced. He needed a distraction.

"First session's tomorrow afternoon, right?" Tim asked.

Ives grinned. "Hell yeah. Bernard and Callie are coming—"

"What am I doing?" Callie asked, after hearing her name.

"Wizards and Warriors," Bernard chimed in. "You in, Tim?"

"Oh, I don't—" Tim started, but Callie cut across him.

"We still need someone to take over for Mark. Come on, please?"

Mark was a senior whose parents made him give up W&W this year to get a better SAT score. Everybody missed his high-level dwarf warrior, but most of all Ives, who'd planned this semester's campaign specifically to benefit from Mark's leadership and experience with the game.

"Am I really the best person to do that?" Tim asked. "It's been a while since I played."

"We'll help you," Bernard offered.

"Totally," Callie agreed.

"You know you want to," said Ives.

"Peer pressure, peer pressure," Ariana began to chant under her breath. Darla and Pat joined her for a few more repetitions.

Tim rolled his eyes, but he couldn't help smiling. "Okay, fine, I'll be there," he relented. "I guess I could use a distraction," he added, while Callie and Ives exchanged a high-five.

He was mostly talking to himself, but Bernard overheard. "Distraction from what?" he asked.

Thankfully, the bell chose that moment to ring. "Tell you later," Tim lied quickly, as the students around them began to move towards the building.

Tim and his friends followed the tide. By the doors, Mr. Lawrence—the PE teacher that everyone called Coach—was supervising the crowd making its way inside. He had dead eyes and a travel mug in his hand.

"You don't *have to* come," said Ives. "Just let me know by noon tomorrow if you change your mind."

"I will," said Tim.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"Thanks. At least then I'll know if I'm completely fucked for the campaign or not."

"Watch your language, Sebastian," Coach Lawrence scolded, though it didn't really sound like his heart was in it.

"Sorry, Coach," Ives said quickly. Lawrence waved the apology away with a yawn. Tim and Ives exchanged a sidelong grin and passed through the door.

By the second bell, Tim was at his usual desk in the third row of his Spanish class. Beside him was Darla, who'd changed seats once she and Tim became friends in the second week of the semester. To Tim's relief, she kept up a steady stream of chatter, telling him all about a movie she'd watched last night as they waited for Señor Paez. Two minutes passed, then three, then Coach Lawrence came in with his travel mug, which he'd apparently just refilled in the teacher's lounge because the lid was in his hand, and the cup was steaming.

"Okay, settle in, settle in," he said, putting the coffee on the desk. "Obviously, I am not Señor Paez." Tim winced at his pronunciation.

“He’s sick today, so we are gonna watch this short documentary about Real Madrid, in English with the Spanish subtitles on, because I want to see it, and Paez said we could, okay? Okay. Yeah, yeah," he added when the class celebrated. “Happy Friday.”

“Happy Friday,” Darla agreed fervently, clearing her desk as Lawrence called a couple students up to help him with the A/V equipment.

Tim sent Darla a quick smile but didn’t put his own notebook away. He’d thought he was going to have to wait for second period study hall, but he was a pro at tuning out sports talk, and it wasn’t like anyone would really be able to see what he was writing in the dark classroom.

This was the perfect opportunity to work on the LexCorp case.

Well, maybe not *work* on it. There wasn’t much he could really do without his laptop. The research and fact-checking he had in mind would still have to wait until next period. But he could at least review what he knew and make notes about what he remembered from the conversation he’d overheard last night. It was better—it was *so much better*—than dwelling on everything that had happened afterwards and everything that might happen next.

Coach Lawrence and his helpers got the A/V system sorted, and Lawrence turned the lights out before taking an unoccupied seat in the front row, facing the screen instead of the class. *Even better,* Tim thought. He pulled his headphones out of his bag and slipped them over his ears. He wasn’t the only one not paying attention; Leah and Rashawn in the row ahead of him were sharing a pair of earbuds to watch something on Leah’s phone, and Jorge in the back right corner —who was fluent in Spanish but needed a language credit to graduate —put his head down on his desk and appeared to go to sleep. For his part, Tim picked up his pen, turned to a fresh page in his notebook, and began to write.

He started with a list of details he remembered from the conversation between Cronin and his parents. He cursed himself for not thinking to record the audio on his phone, but he’d been so surprised that it hadn’t even occurred to him in the moment. Luckily, he had a good memory, and he was eager to put it to use on this instead of...

Still-familiar perfume. Fingers in his too-long hair. A cashmere sleeve against his shoulders.

You’re getting too big for this, his mother said.

He shook himself mentally. He watched the screen—men in white uniforms running across vivid green grass—until he could focus on the page in his notebook again. Then point by point, he made a list:

- DI deal with LC - buy prototype

- "generator" = prototype

- generator project = led by vics (R = lead)

- "accident" - "did more" for project - "sacrifice"?

- C lying to JD & JD? (vics = k. - F.??) OR C covering up something else (vics not k. - accident???)

The notes were messy, probably incomprehensible to anyone other than him, but it didn't matter. He was the only one who needed to read them.

He stared at the list, thinking. There was probably more that he was forgetting, but he thought this was the gist of it. He bent over the notebook again, this time drawing lines, connecting dots, building the narrative.

By the end of Spanish class, he had a good summation of the facts—which was to say, a clear list of things he needed to (somehow) tell Batman or Nightwing.

One: Rota and her team were all working on the same project at LexCorp before they died. (Batman and Nightwing probably knew this already, but oh well.)

Two: The project was something called a "generator," and Cronin really wanted to finish the project even though the team was now dead. They were developing a prototype that Cronin wanted to sell.

Three: There was some kind of accident involving the generator team that either changed or furthered their research. (Tim wasn't sure which.)

And four: There was a possibility that the victims had died due to this accident instead of being killed by the Falcones. (?)

The question mark was there because he kept thinking about removing that last point. The idea that the LexCorp employees had died in an accident made absolutely no sense based on what he knew

about the case, but he reminded himself that he didn't know everything. He wasn't even sure he was right about who the four victims were. He'd made educated guesses based on the knowledge he'd gained from conversations with Bruce and Nightwing, but he could be wrong. And even if he *was* right, he didn't have the same information that they did. There was every chance that this detail about the accident could mean something to Batman's investigation. It could fill in a blank that Tim didn't even know existed.

Which was why, as he packed up his things to head to study hall, his conscience was nagging him about what *wasn't* on his list: namely, who Cronin wanted to sell his prototype *to*.

Tim wasn't a trained detective, but even he could recognize the value of this information. He knew it was important—possibly very important, possibly even crucial—that LexCorp was finishing the generator prototype with the intention of selling it to Drake Industries. The sale or the buyer (or both) could contribute to a motive for the project team's deaths. If nothing else, it gave Batman another group of people to dig into, to possibly question and learn more. Holding this information back would slow down the investigation, giving more chances for the bad guys to get away with it.

Tim knew this... and yet.

Callie and Ives were in study hall with him. He settled into his usual seat between them and set his backpack on the table. Ives had his chemistry homework open already, but Tim could see his notebook was filled with warlock stats instead of equations. Tim suppressed a smile and looked to Callie as Ms. Kwan, the study hall supervisor, entered the room and took her seat at the front. Tim pulled out his laptop along with his Spanish textbook for cover, and Callie dove into her ragged copy of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Tim wasn't going to share the information about his parents. At least, not yet. He soothed his guilty conscience with the thought that, if Batman dug into the generator project, he'd find it himself anyway. Tim's mother had mentioned something about signing an agreement, after all. There had to be official records; if Tim just gave Batman a little nudge towards Cronin's motives regarding the prototype, surely he'd find it in no time.

And then the twisting, gnawing feeling in Tim's gut would go away, because he wasn't *really* betraying either of them... right?

Good man, he heard his father say.

Tim thought for a few seconds that he might throw up. He closed his eyes, breathed deep, swallowed the acid in his throat.

“You alright, man?” Ives murmured.

“Yeah,” said Tim, opening his eyes again. “Thanks, I will be.”

Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

> Both Tim and Bruce enjoy a brief distraction from everything that's happened recently.
>
> *Saturday afternoon found Tim in Ives' basement wearing a red cape with a hood.*

Chapter Notes

> Fanfic Santa here, with some almost-fluff. Enjoy, and merry Christmas to those who celebrate! Happy Thursday to those who don't.

Saturday afternoon found Tim in Ives' basement wearing a red cape with a hood. (Did that make it a cloak? He wasn't sure.)

Ives had met them at the front door with a basket of costume pieces. (His mom worked for a theatre company.) He insisted that everyone had to pick one item that suited their character and wear it for the whole campaign.

"Are you trying to trick us into LARPing with you?" asked Hudson, sending Ives a suspicious look.

"I would *never,"* Ives replied, one hand over his heart.

"Sure, sure," said Kevin, but this didn't stop him from digging through the basket until he found a green pair of fingerless gloves.

Watching the three of them interact set off a small pang in Tim's chest. He'd known Kevin and Hudson when he was at the Academy before, but since he'd been back, he hadn't really reconnected with them the same way he had with Ives. He couldn't help but wonder now how close the four of them would be if he'd never left.

While he was lost in thought, he heard the rustle of fabric and felt something land on his shoulders. A second later, the world went reddish dark as a hood fell over his eyes, and Bernard laughed behind him.

"It's perfect," he said, as Tim turned around. "Red suits you."

“Thank you,” Tim replied, pushing back the hood and tugging the cape-cloak thing forward enough to get a look at the fabric. (*Cape,* he decided. He was going with cape.) “But does it suit Kram?”

Kram was the name of Mark’s dwarf warrior, the character that Tim had agreed to take over. Aside from the fact that he was a dwarf and a warrior, his name was literally the only thing Tim knew about Kram. Bernard told him the name was a Tolkien reference; Callie said it was just ‘Mark’ spelled backwards; and Ives said it was both. Tim hoped the character sheet would give him some insight.

“Who cares?” Bernard asked, draping himself with a pale blue shawl that matched his eyes almost exactly. “You get to choose what Kram likes now.”

Tim nodded, adjusting the cape and giving a little twirl, feeling it swish out behind him. “Kram likes red,” he decided.

“Hell yeah he does,” said Ives with a grin.

“Take a picture?” asked Callie suddenly, holding out her phone in Tim’s direction. She’d shoved a purple beret over her bright orange curls. It clashed violently enough to look intentional, especially combined with her black sparkly lipstick.

Tim snapped several pictures and handed the phone back to her. “Thanks!” she exclaimed, swiping through them. “Ari’s gonna love these. You should bring your camera next session, Tim, so we can get some group shots.”

“Tim’s in the group, too, though,” Bernard pointed out.

“Oh, right,” said Callie, her joy deflating.

“I’ve been thinking about getting a tripod,” Tim said to make her feel better. It sort of wasn’t a lie. “And my digital camera does have a timer.”

“Awesome,” said Ives, as Callie found her smile again. “Next time I’ll get us some props, too.”

“You *are* tricking us into LARPing with you,” said Hudson, who was fastening faux-leather arm bands over his wrists.

Ives gave him a somewhat coy smile and led the way downstairs.

The three hours that followed were pretty fun. As a warrior, Kram wasn't the type of character Tim would normally choose—he preferred magic users who could strike from the shadows—so it took him a little while to find a groove. It was fun to fight, even if he wasn't used to it, but Ives was a clever writer and a good GM. He'd worked on the story for this campaign all summer, so even at this first session, Tim could tell there was a lot of detail to discover.

During a break, Hudson told him that this was the most insightful he'd ever seen Kram. "He doesn't usually strategize this much," he explained. "It's usually more like, ax now, questions later."

"Oh. Should I stop?" Tim asked, worried.

"Are you kidding?" Kevin chimed in. "Ives is thrilled, man. So many times last year, he'd have to make us find a scroll that explained how a puzzle was supposed to work."

Hudson caught Tim's look of confusion and went on. "As in, the puzzle that we would have had to solve if Kram hadn't just attacked the NPC."

"Oh," Tim said again, but that made him feel better. Maybe he wasn't used to being a brawler, but it was like Bernard said: he got to decide who Kram was now. And that, he thought, when Ives announced that they'd reached a stopping point and collected everyone's costume pieces, was pretty fun.

"Next session's in two weeks," Ives reminded them at the top of the stairs. "Let me know if advance if you can't make it, okay?"

Everyone promised they would, and, one by one, people's parents arrived to pick them up. Callie went first—"My parents are *so* paranoid," she said, rolling her eyes—then Kevin and Hudson left at pretty much the same time. Soon it was just Ives, Bernard, and Tim standing on the front porch, soaking up the last of the day's weak sunshine.

"Glad you came?" Ives asked Tim.

"You mean, am I glad you guys peer-pressured me into this?" Tim replied with a sideways grin.

Bernard huffed a laugh. "Tomato to-mah-to," he said, which didn't really seem like the same thing to Tim, but he let it slide.

“Yeah,” he answered the question honestly. “I am glad.”

“Well, good,” said Ives. “Me, too.”

There was a short pause, then Bernard asked, “You gonna tell us what this is distracting you from now?”

Tim’s heart skipped a beat. Avoiding his friends’ eyes, he scanned the cars on the street, but none of them were Alfred’s black Rolls Royce.

“You don’t have to,” said Bernard when he didn’t answer.

“But you seemed off, yesterday,” Ives said.

He shrugged—an awkward jerk of his shoulders—and Tim remembered something: Ives was the first person who’d noticed that something was wrong back when he left his parents’ house, too. He was surprisingly observant. And Bernard...

“We were worried about you,” he added, his blue eyes rather intensely focused on Tim.

“I saw my parents on Thursday night,” Tim told those eyes without really meaning to. They became confused, and Tim explained. “I don’t live with them anymore. The State took me away a while ago.”

“Oh.” Bernard blinked. “Wow. Why— uh, never mind.”

“So you had a visit with your case worker?” asked Ives, after whacking Bernard on the arm.

“No,” Tim sighed. “Bruce had a party— some kind of work thing. My parents usually get invited, because their company does work with his company, but they never come.” He shrugged. “This time they did.”

“Who’s Bruce?” Bernard asked Ives in an undertone.

“Foster dad,” Ives answered, just as quiet. Louder, he asked Tim, “What happened?”

Tim spoke to the porch railing. It was easier. “They snuck away from the party to get into the family wing to find me and talk to me.”

There was a beat of silence as his friends processed this. Then Ives asked, “What did they want?”

Tim shrugged wordlessly. It was way too complicated to explain.

“Are they in trouble now?” asked Ives.

Tim nodded. “I think so. My case worker said they’d... I don’t think I’m ever going back to live with them.”

“I’m sorry,” said Ives, with genuine feeling.

“Yeah, that sucks,” Bernard agreed.

“So what now?” Ives asked. “Is there gonna be a trial or something?”

“I’m not sure,” Tim answered honestly. “But the incident is under investigation. They’re looking into my parents and— and Bruce, too, because he screwed up with the guest list by not making sure they weren’t invited.”

“Damn,” Ives said under his breath. Tim nodded in agreement.

They stood on the porch in silence following the conversation, until Bernard’s mom arrived in her white minivan a few minutes later.

“That’s me,” he said. He waved at his mom, but he didn’t step down from the porch just yet. “This was fun, thanks for hosting,” he told Ives.

“Yeah, no problem,” said Ives. He stepped back slightly.

“I’m really glad you came today,” Bernard added to Tim, who was distracted by Ives’ sudden movement. “And, uh, I wanted to ask. Do you think you’d want to... hang out some time? Just the two of us?”

“Yeah,” said Tim automatically. Then he realized what was happening. “Oh. Uh. Yeah,” he said again, because, to his surprise, it felt true. “Yeah, that’d be fun.”

Bernard’s smile when he said that was— Tim hadn’t really noticed before how nice his smile was.

“Okay,” he said, as he took the steps down to the grass and turned around. “See you later.”

“Bye,” said Tim.

Ives waved. Bernard got into the van, and it pulled out of the driveway. Tim’s face felt a little warm, but he didn’t think it was because of the sun.

“So,” said Ives slowly.

Tim huffed an embarrassed laugh. “What?”

“Nothing, just… that’s exciting.”

“I guess,” said Tim, looking around for Alfred’s Rolls again.

“I think he’s pretty into you,” Ives said after a pause.

Tim felt his stomach do a weird little fluttery thing. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Ives nodded. “Thankfully, Pat got over you, or we’d have a whole love triangle side plot going on over here.”

“Pat?” Tim blinked. “They— wait, what?”

Gravel crunched. “Oh, there’s your ride,” said Ives.

“No, but—” Tim looked over at Bruce’s incognito brown sedan. Behind the wheel, he waved. Tim waved back but refocused on Ives immediately. “I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah, they noticed,” Ives said dryly.

“But— I—”

“Relax, it’s fine,” Ives told him. “They briefly had a crush on the cute boy from swimming. Then they got to know you better. Came to their senses.”

“Hey,” Tim protested, and Ives laughed.

“I’m kidding,” he said, “but don’t worry. You didn’t break their heart or anything. You’re better off friends. They know that.”

“Huh,” said Tim. He stared at Ives with renewed admiration; he really did see and know a lot.

“Just don’t let it impact my game, okay?” Ives added in a very different tone.

Tim laughed and stepped down from the porch. “I won’t. See you Monday?”

“See you Monday.” Ives waved as Tim crossed the yard and got into the car.

“So, how was it?” Bruce asked as Tim buckled his seatbelt. “Did you have fun?”

“Yeah,” Tim said, still thinking about the conversation that just ended. “A lot of fun.”

“You sound surprised,” Bruce commented, reversing out of Ives’ laneway. “The game wasn’t too nerdy after all?”

“Oh, no, it was incredibly nerdy,” Tim replied. “Ives made us choose something to wear from his mom’s spare costume box.”

“Yeah? What did you choose?”

“Bernard chose something for me, actually,” said Tim. He felt himself smiling. *Red suits you.* “It was a red cape. With a hood.”

“Hm,” said Bruce nonchalantly as he turned onto the highway that would take them back to the manor. “Capes can be fun.”

Tim had to press his lips together to stop himself from laughing. Because— *seriously??*

“Yeah. Fun,” was all he managed to say instead.

Bruce exited the study and made his way down the hall. After a lifetime in this house, he knew just where to step to avoid the floorboards that creaked.

It was his third night of keeping this vigil, but only his first night of balancing it with an outing in the suit. He didn’t feel good about it, but Gordon had called him instead of just lighting the signal, so it wasn’t like he had much choice in the matter. He couldn’t keep offloading Batman’s work onto Nightwing’s shoulders, and he couldn’t stay in forever; Gotham’s rogues got cocky after a few nights in a row without a Bat sighting.

Still, Alfred had had to talk him into it, convincing him that the alibi would hold if anything happened, and, besides, plenty of parents go out on a Saturday night. And it wasn’t like he was leaving Tim unattended. If anything happened, Alfred promised he would call at once.

So, he went out. He met with Gordon about the Riddler, who’d just moved into an abandoned three-storey storefront in Kingston.

Research and a few helpful conversations with Riddler's known lackeys revealed his plot: he planned to kidnap three doctors from Elliot Memorial and restrain them, one per floor, surrounded by death traps that he apparently thought Batman wouldn't be able to solve without sacrificing the hostages.

A crash through the boarded-up front window disabused him of that notion pretty quickly.

GCPD moved in and took the Riddler away. He howled and wailed and screamed as per usual, but he'd been caught so off-guard that he didn't even have a weapon in his hand when he came at Batman. It was over, and he knew it.

Then it was just a matter of rounding up a few outstanding henchmen, to make sure they wouldn't go through with their boss' plan despite his being too locked up to issue orders. Thanks to Barbara's mastery of traffic cams and CCTV systems, they were in GCPD custody in a little over two hours, and Gordon felt safe telling the cops he'd assigned to protect the hospital to go home. Batman did the same.

Now it was almost four, and Bruce planned to stay up the rest of the night— as much of it as possible, anyway. This morning—yesterday morning now—he'd let himself sleep at 4:30, but the day before that —the morning after the Garden Party—he'd still been awake when Tim's alarm went off. He'd waited to make sure Tim got up, then took a short nap before getting up again to see him off to school.

At the top of the stairs, he paused to conduct a visual inspection of the pitch-black bedroom hallway before proceeding. Tim's light was off— not a trace of light bled out from under the door—and it was dead silent. If he strained his ears, he could hear the manor's HVAC system and a barely-there whisper of rain hitting the windows. No typing, no music, no pen scratching, no movement. He silently approached Tim's door and listened anyway.

Slow, steady breathing. Nothing more.

He exhaled at the same time Tim did and continued on to the master bedroom at the end of the hall. He set himself up at the desk with his laptop that would show him alerts on both security systems. Then he leaned back in the chair to keep watch.

He really thought that Tim would have run by now. Considering what had happened in Metropolis, Bruce was sure that Tim would be climbing out his bedroom window just minutes after they said

goodnight on Thursday. Either that or he'd try another trick with the security system. Bruce had even wondered if Tim was using a fake excuse this afternoon and saying he was going to his friend Sebastian's house for Wizards and Warriors when really he was going somewhere else. Bruce had called Sebastian's mother to confirm. Still, as he was driving to pick Tim up, there were a few seconds when he let himself worry that Tim wouldn't be there after all.

But he was. He hadn't gone anywhere. (Yet?)

Bruce straightened up and got to work. Since Thursday night, he'd been using his mostly sleepless nights to check and double-check every detail about his civilian life, to make sure that Child Services wouldn't find anything out of the ordinary. Yesterday, he'd talked to WE's Business Development Events team about the mishap with the party invitations. They'd been very apologetic, though not without pointing out that they'd sent him a list of his contacts a month ago, and it had been his job to review and flag any that he wanted to remove from the Garden Party guest list. He hoped that the investigation by Child Services would turn up this honest mistake and nothing more. It really had been an innocent error, but that wouldn't protect him from consequences if Child Services happened upon something more damning.

He found himself getting restless at the thought. He stood up and went to the window. With the light of his desk lamp behind him, the glass was like a mirror. His reflection loomed, his black t-shirt and navy blue track pants shapeless shadows under his chin. If he tilted his forehead back, further out of the light—

Here I am, said the Bat.

He knew there were ways of finding out exactly how the investigation into Bruce Wayne was going. It would be easy—almost too easy—to bug Lillian's office, to tap her phone, to crack into her computer.

That's not all, Batman whispered from the window.

He was right. He had video and audio surveillance running at the manor 24-7. With just a few keystrokes, Bruce could find out what Tim and Lillian had spoken about on Thursday night. Even better, he could find out exactly what had happened in the foyer a few hours before. He could play back every second of Tim's encounter with his parents and uncover the best ways to prove that they'd broken the rules without having to reveal the existence of the tape itself.

Yes, said Batman, encouraged.

He took a deep breath. Watched his shadow move with him.

This isn't a Batman problem, he told his reflection, but it wasn't very convincing.

Batman could find out everything in a matter of minutes. Tim would never need to know that he'd watched the tapes and listened to the audio. And if he found out, well, it was all to protect him. It was to keep him safe, to stop him from worrying, to make him feel better. Really, it was best for everyone.

Then another voice cut through the noise: *Tim does not need Batman to apprehend him.*

Bruce turned his back on the window.

He'd respect Lillian's boundaries and carry on blindly into her investigation. He'd trust her when she said it would be okay. And he wouldn't review the surveillance footage. He'd respect Tim's privacy. He'd follow the rules of confidentiality that dictated Tim and Lillian's relationship. He'd trust that Tim would one day feel safe enough to tell him about what happened with his parents before they were interrupted.

But, he decided as he settled behind his computer again, he was still going to keep watch.

Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

Tim has another nightmare. This time Bruce gets there in time to do something about it.

“They all died,” Tim whispered. His eyes, still focused on something far outside the window, grew shiny in the yellow lamplight. “I didn’t stop it.”

Didn’t, *Bruce noticed. Not* couldn’t.

Chapter Notes

The holiday season is over, so we are back to our regularly scheduled angst. And I do mean regularly scheduled! I'll be posting every other Tuesday until at least March.

And yeah, angst. I've had this scene in my head for literally over a year at this point, and it took me a long time to get it right. It means a lot to me. I gave Tim my CPTSD nightmares, but I am both Tim and Bruce here: I'm the teenager crying in the middle of the night, and I'm also the traumatized adult trying desperately to keep my shit together long enough to help someone who clearly needs it.

Content warning for gun violence, blood, and dead bodies (in the dream), as well as a brief mention of Tim's last nightmare, where a child died. Also, Bruce experiences some flashbacks to finding Jason's body in the desert.

It's a heavy chapter (sorry not sorry), but once again I direct you to the title of the fic. We're doing alright.

Love,
MrsD

It was about a quarter to five when something changed.

A silent alert lit up the bottom corner of Bruce’s screen, pulling his eyes from the bank records he was examining. It was one of the bedroom hallway audio sensors, detecting a noise. Bruce got to his feet at once and poked his head out into the hall, expecting to see Tim’s door opening, or maybe Tim himself, but the hall was empty.

Bruce frowned. Had Tim snuck down the stairs so quickly that he missed him? He stepped out of the bedroom and moved silently forward. After a few paces, he realized he could hear something. It was an unsettling, off-kilter sort of warble that it took him a moment to recognize.

After all, he'd only heard it once before— at the penthouse in Metropolis in the middle of the night.

"The store's open, guys," Bernard said, pointing to the sign on the door.

Tim checked his watch and winced. "Closing at nine?" They only had seven minutes.

"Ten, actually," said Bernard. He reached for the handle. "Shall we?"

A shadow passed to Tim's left, disappearing down the alley. "You go ahead," he said. His camera bag was heavy around his neck. "I'll be right there."

"Be careful, Bug," said Ariana. She was so pretty with her dark hair shining in the streetlight. She was holding both Tim and Callie's hands. Both girls smiled at him with matching red lipstick.

Pat touched the camera strap, running one finger around Tim's neck and down. "Nice camera, Shutterbug. Come back soon."

"Yeah, we need you." Bernard kissed his cheek and opened the door. "See you later, Bug."

Tim was on the roof, searching. He couldn't find his backpack, and his shoes were only half-on. He needed his bag, he needed his camera, because Batman was perched on a gargoyle just one building over. Tim raised the camera in his hands, lined up the shot, and pressed the shutter.

The click was loud in the darkness. Tim ducked to get out of sight, but Batman didn't look his way. Didn't move a muscle. It was like he was posing for Tim, letting Tim take the time he needed to change the lens, to get a new filter out of his bag—

Where was his bag? There it was. Wait, why was it empty?!

Batman's cape fluttered in the wind. Tim snapped another picture, but

it just wasn't right with this lens and filter. Then he remembered there was a camera store across the street. He raced down the fire escape and passed Nightwing climbing up. They waved at each other, but Tim had no time to stop and say hello. He ran inside the camera store. Someone was blocking the centre aisle, complaining about too much salt on their fries. Tim gave the cashier the money that Bruce had given him for back-to-school shoes and took the lime green plastic bag back to the roof, hoping, hoping—

Yes! Batman was still there! This was going to be the best photo set ever.

He took pictures until the Bat-Signal lit up the horizon. Batman stood up, and it looked like part of the statue breaking off and coming to life. Tim snapped pictures like crazy, a huge grin on his face. Batman leapt, his cape snapped out, and he glided away without a sound.

Tim had to tell his friends about this. He had to tell *everyone* about this. He walked along the street to the shoe store, his eyes on the camera screen, flipping through pictures. They were the best he'd ever gotten, he just knew it. He opened the door with one hand.

"Guys," he called, his eyes still on his camera. "Guys, come see, this is really cool."

No one answered. Tim looked up.

The walls of the shoe store were red. Blood on the floor, seeping into the cracks of the old hardwood.

"Red suits you." The man in the black ski mask stood at the counter, holding a shotgun.

"What did you do?" Tim tried to say. "Where are my friends?"

Darla was on the floor. Her eyes huge, a neat, bloody hole between them. Bernard lay on top of Ives at the end of the aisle. Shoe boxes all around them. Torn tissue paper sticking to Tim's shoes.

Breathing. Loud. Harsh. Ragged.

"What did *I* do?" said the man in the black ski mask holding a shotgun. "What did *you* do? You weren't here."

Pat was sitting up against a wall, glassy-eyed beside Callie. Ariana was lying at their feet, still holding Callie's hand. Tim looked down. The

hand that Ariana was holding earlier was now covered in blood.

“I didn’t know,” he said— but it was all just air. So much air, but he couldn’t breathe.

The man in the black ski mask wasn’t holding a shotgun anymore. The man in the black ski mask was Batman.

“You should have been here instead of running around taking pictures,” he said.

In the distance, Tim could hear someone crying.

“What was so important?” Batman demanded, stepping over Darla’s body. “Why weren’t you here when they needed you?”

It wasn’t real. Tim shook.

“Why weren’t you here!”

“I’m sorry,” Tim said, but the sound of weeping drowned out his words.

“Sorry’s not gonna do a damn thing, sport,” said the man in the black ski mask. The man in the black ski mask was his father.

It wasn’t real. Tim knew, Tim *knew,* but—

“They needed you,” said his father, said Batman, said Bruce, said Dick, said his friends, said his mother, said the man in the black ski mask.

Not real, but the tears were coming— no, they were here. Loud. Wet. Shaking. So loud. So loud they’d wake—

Tim opened his eyes and saw the ceiling. His ears were wet. It wasn’t real. He tried to breathe— ragged, noisy. Sobbing. Shaking as he rolled over into his pillow.

He couldn’t stop. It wasn’t real. It wouldn’t stop.

It was all his fault, and it would never, ever stop.

Bruce didn’t hesitate this time.

Tim’s room was grey with ambient light from the open curtains. Bruce could see Tim curled into a fetal position on the mattress, the sheets

and duvet scattered around him like displaced earth around a meteor strike.

And he was crying in his sleep— ragged, uninhibited.

“Tim?” Bruce called softly, moving into the room. Tim’s shoulders shook as he sobbed into his pillow. “Tim, wake up. You’re dreaming.”

“I know,” Tim mumbled, to Bruce’s surprise. He hadn’t thought Tim was awake.

He wondered for a second if he should leave; he knew Tim didn’t like being seen like this. But he was shaking. There was none of the self-soothing he’d witnessed in Metropolis.

Bruce was staying.

He perched on the edge of the mattress and gently placed a hand on Tim’s upper arm, waiting and almost expecting Tim to recoil, but he didn’t. He was holding onto the pillow with an iron grip. Bruce rubbed his arm, and after a moment it relaxed slightly.

“I know it wasn’t real,” said Tim, his voice hoarse.

Bruce asked, “Do you want to talk about it?”

Tim shuddered with fresh tears. His arms curled tighter, the pillow pressed to his face.

“Or a distraction,” Bruce decided. Without removing the hand from Tim’s shoulder, he moved closer, reaching across with his other arm to find the bedside lamp. “I’m going to turn on the light, okay? It’ll help for you to see something else instead of... whatever you just saw.”

Bruce waited for Tim’s nod, then clicked the lamp on. The light let him get a good look at just how hard Tim had been crying— what little Bruce could see of his face was puffy and red. The burgundy fabric of his pillowcase was so damp it was almost black, spread around Tim’s head like a dark, misshapen halo.

Bruce sighed, which had the unintended effect of making Tim turn even further away, hiding his face from Bruce almost completely. But he didn’t tell Bruce to get out, and he didn’t pull away from Bruce’s touch, either. So Bruce stayed right where he was, rubbing the top of Tim’s shoulder absently while his tears slowed to a stop and his sniffs petered out.

Finally, he took a deep breath and stirred. Bruce reached over to the nightstand again and pulled a tissue from the box. He offered it wordlessly, and Tim took it without meeting his eye. Bruce made a point of turning his head to look towards the door while Tim swiped at his face and blew his nose. But he only took his hand off Tim's shoulder when Tim pushed himself up and sat against the headboard.

Bruce gave him a faint smile. It was a relief when Tim returned it—thin, tired, real. Bruce turned back towards the door and was about to suggest something—he wasn't sure what, but he thought it started with coffee—when Tim spoke.

"A couple weeks ago, my friends and I were at a store that got robbed."

Bruce whipped his head around, startled. Whatever he'd been expecting Tim to say, it wasn't that. In all the chaos surrounding the Garden Party, Bruce had almost forgotten about the robbery. Why was Tim bringing it up now?

"A man came in with a gun," Tim recounted. He was looking away, towards the window. His voice was flat, robotic— a recitation of facts. "He pointed it at me and Ives. And he shot the shelf behind us."

Bruce's pulse kicked up. His breathing changed, and his body seemed to grow cold.

"We were okay," Tim said, as if he had noticed Bruce's reaction. Then he shrugged his shoulders. "Obviously. But..."

"But?" Bruce dared to prompt him when he trailed off.

Tim's throat bobbed as he swallowed hard. "I dreamed I was back there."

"Oh," Bruce said softly. *That* was why Tim was bringing this up.

"They all died," Tim whispered. His eyes, still focused on something far outside the window, grew shiny in the yellow lamplight. "I didn't stop it."

Didn't, Bruce noticed. Not *couldn't.*

"I was supposed to go in with them," Tim went on, "but I got distracted. I wanted to take pictures of Batman."

Another surprise, even stranger than the last. Bruce stared openly while Tim grimaced and turned pink with embarrassment, his attention still fixed on the window.

“When I got there, they were dead,” he said. His eyes welled up again. “All of them had been shot. They were on the floor, and the robber, the man with the gun, he— he—”

“Hey,” Bruce tried to soothe him. He made to pull him in for a hug, but Tim raised a hand between them, imposing distance.

“I *saw* them,” he said, his eyes closed like he was seeing it again.

Bruce reached over and grabbed Tim’s forearm, trying to ground him in the here and now. “It wasn’t real.”

“It felt so real.”

“I know,” Bruce murmured. “I know it did.”

He kept a hand on Tim’s arm, intending to keep him from falling back into the dream, but instead of winding down, Tim’s emotional state seemed to keep amping itself up. His breath quickened, and he squirmed away from Bruce’s touch after only a few seconds.

Bruce let him go, his mind racing through solutions. Tim seemed to be verging on a panic attack, so a breathing exercise would be best, accompanied by some grounding. “Let’s take a breath,” he started to say, but Tim spoke at the same time.

“I think I’m— I think there’s something wrong. With me,” he said, his eyes squeezed shut.

“Take a breath, Tim, it’ll be okay,” Bruce tried again.

“No,” said Tim, even more agitated. “There was— I saw *blood,* and dead people— my friends, I— I saw them. Do you know what that feels like?”

“Yes, I know,” was all Bruce got out before Tim cut him off.

“Normal people don’t dream about their friends dying! And— and that’s not even all that I— this happens a lot, and— and— there’s— there’s something wrong with me!”

Bruce grabbed his flailing arm. “There’s *not,”* he said as firmly as he could, because he’d noticed that Tim responded well to that when he

was in a spiral like this.

It worked— Tim stopped talking. He stared, his chest heaving. Bruce gentled his grip but shifted a little closer on the bed.

“Tim, there is nothing wrong with you,” Bruce reiterated. “Your dreams aren’t signs that you’re broken, or that you’re losing your mind, or anything like that.”

Tim’s red-rimmed eyes were wide. “How do you know?”

Bruce heard the trust implicit in the question. *Prove it to me, please. I’ll believe it if you can show me the evidence.*

He took a deep breath. He was in uncharted territory. Only a handful of people knew what he saw when he closed his eyes. He wouldn’t— he *couldn’t*—tell Tim everything, but if it would help...

“When I was a boy, I had a lot of nightmares,” he began, with some difficulty. “And they were always different from other kids’. My friends and classmates, they would tell me about scary dreams they had, and it was always a monster chasing them through the woods, or something that seemed so stupid, so simple, compared to what I saw.”

Tim’s eyes met his again.

“I had dreams about my parents dying,” Bruce said, looking away as he answered the unvoiced question. “I saw it over and over... in detail. You want to talk about blood? And dead bodies?” He swallowed hard. “I saw it all. Again and again. For a long time, I saw them almost every night.”

Tim was watching him now, he could feel it. But he kept his gaze fixed on the bedspread between them.

“The dreams got worse when I tried to go to med school,” Bruce remembered. “Like my brain suddenly knew what to look for. I saw broken bones, torn ligaments, grey matter sprayed all over the pavement.”

He glanced up suddenly, worried that he’d said too much, but Tim didn’t seem disgusted or frightened. He still had that look like he was hanging on Bruce’s every word, waiting for the answer to his dilemma.

“What did you do?” he asked in hushed tones.

Bruce exhaled and told part of the truth, even though he knew it didn't set a good example. "I would get up in the middle of the night and reread my copy of the autopsy report. To remind myself that that wasn't how it happened. And that—"

His voice faltered unexpectedly. He took a breath, then pressed on. "And that my dreams were wrong. That there wasn't anything I could have done."

The room was silent for a long moment. "It doesn't feel like that," Tim confessed.

"It never feels like that."

"Yeah."

"How often do you have dreams like this?" Bruce asked after another pause.

Tim's shoulders twitched.

"A lot?" Bruce prompted gently, when that was the only answer he received.

"Not a lot. Just... two or three times a month," Tim said eventually.

Bruce blinked and fought to keep his expression neutral. How many of Tim's nightmares had he missed?

"Less since I got here, though," Tim added, like he knew what Bruce was thinking. "This is only the second or third one I've had since I moved in."

The tension in Bruce's body uncoiled, just a little. "You can talk to me about them," he said. "Any time."

Tim didn't respond to that, even though Bruce gave him a full minute of silence.

"Are the dreams always like this?"

The question earned him another half-hearted shrug.

"You dream about someone getting hurt or killed?"

"Yeah," Tim finally answered. "And it's always my fault."

“How so?”

“Bad things happen because I’m not there,” Tim explained. “I’m late, I’m doing something else—something stupid—and that’s why it happens.”

“That’s not why—” Bruce tried to interject.

“The last one I had,” Tim carried on, “I was walking with a kid from one of the foster homes I was at. And he got ahead of me, and he wasn’t looking where he was going, and he stepped in front of a train.”

Bruce’s mouth fell open. Tim, his eyes filled with tears, didn’t notice.

“It was my fault. He wasn’t paying attention, but *I* should have been. I *knew* there was a train crossing, I *knew* he wasn’t looking.”

“You’re cognizant enough, in the dreams, to know that?” Bruce asked, wanting to confirm, to understand.

Tim nodded and swiped at his eyes. “There’s always a point near the end where I know it isn’t real. It’s like I wake up enough to know that I should do something. But by then it’s too late. I can’t do anything about it.” His words failed as a sob cut through them. “Why can’t I ever do anything to stop it?”

“Oh, Tim.” Bruce wrapped him in his arms without waiting for permission.

He knew what it was like. He knew how Tim was feeling, the guilt that his dreams were instilling in him, the sense of always needing to be alert to potential danger. Hypervigilance was as familiar and welcome to Bruce by now as an old friend, and it had saved his life and countless others more than once. Over the years, he’d transformed it from a weakness into a tool. Like his fear.

But he knew that none of this would help a scared kid in the middle of the night who couldn’t understand why he saw awful things in his dreams. None of it would have helped *him* when he *was* that scared kid in the middle of the night. So Bruce just held him, hooking his chin over Tim’s skinny shoulder, and let him cry.

When he’d settled somewhat, Bruce pulled back and handed him another tissue.

“Thanks,” Tim mumbled. It was almost a relief that he seemed embarrassed.

“You know, that night at the shoe store,” Bruce said. “You felt helpless.”

Tim nodded, balling up the tissue in his hand.

“The dream trapped you in that helpless moment, because you haven’t finished processing how frightening that moment was. I’m sorry to say, Tim, but you might never finish processing that. You might have dreams like this for a long time.”

“Like you,” Tim said, looking down again.

“Like me,” Bruce agreed with a sad smile. “But, Tim, even in that moment at the store, you *weren’t* helpless. You got Pat to call 9-1-1. You made sure your friends were safe. You pulled Sebastian down when the robber raised his gun.”

Too late—when Tim narrowed his eyes—Bruce realized he was revealing too much. There was no way, presumably, for Bruce Wayne to know any of what he’d just said. He held his breath, waiting for Tim to ask, preparing possible explanations, but after a few seconds, Tim seemed to let it go, his expression smoothing out. He nodded as if to himself and looked away again.

Bruce relaxed somewhat. “I am so proud of you,” he said, thinking not just of the shoe store surveillance footage that showed how brave he’d been in that moment, but also how brave he was being right now. Bruce knew how much courage it took to let the walls down and ask for help.

Tim’s uncertain eyes landed on him again. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Bruce affirmed. Then he said it one more time, just to be sure. “There’s nothing wrong with you. You’re not crazy because you have dreams like this. And if you start to feel like that again, come talk to me, okay? I want to help.”

Tim’s little shake of his head was heartbreaking. “Why?”

Why did you take me in? Bruce heard him ask again. *Why am I here? Why do you even care?*

Bruce had been practising a too-late answer to those questions, but

now wasn't the time. Tonight had been hard enough already. "Because I know what it's like," he said simply.

Tim sniffed and looked to the window again. "It sucks," he muttered.

Bruce huffed a laugh. "Yeah. It does." He glanced at the clock; it was well after five now. "You should try and get some more sleep. It's Sunday, there's no reason to be up this early."

Tim nodded, and Bruce patted his arm one more time before getting to his feet. Tim flipped over his pillow and sank a little lower into the covers, and Bruce tugged on the bedspread to straighten out the parts where he'd wrinkled it— or, that's what he told himself he was doing.

"Goodnight," he said, his hand on the lamp.

"More like morning," Tim countered, but his eyes were closing.

Bruce turned out the light and went to the door, pausing for a last look. Tim rolled over, his back to him, and breathed out a long, sleepy breath.

When Bruce shut Tim's bedroom door, it was punctuation at the end of a long sentence. His shoulders slumped, and he closed his eyes.

Like taking off his cape, he felt something fall down his back and pool at his ankles. He'd trip over it if he wasn't careful.

For a moment, he wanted to pick it back up and wear it until he became it, until he could look at himself in the mirror and see the person that he'd just projected.

Strong. Safe. Recovered. Someone whose nightmares were only in the past.

He realized abruptly he was cold. He was in his bedroom, closing the door, before he consciously decided to move. His chest was shaking, his breathing ragged. There was a tremor in his hands.

A distraction, he thought, but he knew it was too late for that. He was already in it, and he could already see flashes of the nightmares he didn't share with Tim, laid over the familiar sight of his bedroom lit by the warm yellow desk lamp. He blinked and he could see crimson soaking into hot sand. He crossed his arms over his chest, and his fingers touched cool, pulse-less skin above a dirty red collar. He

breathed and caught the acrid scent of a recent explosion. And blood. The iron lingered at the back of his throat, bile building behind it.

Yes, Tim. I know what it's like.

It got worse before it got better. When it finally passed, he was exhausted. But he made himself get up instead of slumping over onto his pillow.

He walked out of his room and paused by Tim's door. He held his breath and listened to Tim breathe. Just to check, just to make sure.

Then he went downstairs.

Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

Tim pulls the rip cord on a plan.

“There’s a chance that your parents will see that terminating their parental rights is for the best,” Lillian said, changing the subject. “There’s a chance they’ll give them up voluntarily, to allow someone else to step in and adopt you.”

“I want to be emancipated,” Tim blurted out.

Tim opened his eyes to find his room lit by grey daylight, and he could hear sheets of rain hitting the glass. Clearly, Gotham’s autumn weather had finally arrived.

He lay there a few minutes, staring at the ceiling, letting the memory of the night before come back. As it always did, thinking of the nightmare itself made him a little shaky—he could still see his friends’ lifeless faces and still feel that sense of dread and guilt that would overwhelm him if he let it—so he didn’t think about it. Instead, he tried to focus on what had followed.

It had been... nice, he decided, to have someone in his room with him right after. He hadn’t ever really had that. Maybe a few times, when he was small. But this particular brand of nightmare had started after his parents decided he didn’t need a nanny anymore, so by the time he went into foster care, he’d been dealing with them for so long on his own, he knew how to talk himself down after— no grown-up intervention necessary. And by then he knew better than to talk about them, in case one of his foster parents got spooked. Hell, *he* got spooked whenever he thought about them too much. It seemed too possible that they were a sign of something deeply messed up in his head that he didn’t want to look at too closely.

He moved his legs restlessly under the blanket, remembering the way he’d panicked about that last night. He really had just thrown up all those words, all over Bruce, hadn’t he? It was *so* embarrassing. So much for making things easier on Batman, Tim thought guiltily. He was supposed to be fixing this, reminding Bruce that it wasn’t his job to worry, because Tim didn’t *need* Bruce to worry about him, so Bruce definitely didn’t need to be up in the middle of the night taking care of him. There were way more important things that he could have

been doing.

Still. It *had* helped. Having another person there to talk him out of the panic spiral, to tell him that, no, there wasn't anything broken inside the way he'd feared for years.

To Tim's surprise, he found himself believing that even now, the morning after. Because, as much as Tim felt bad about not making Bruce's life any easier, Tim believed Bruce when he said Tim wasn't losing his mind. Bruce—Batman—knew broken. He knew crazy. He wouldn't have said Tim wasn't if he didn't believe it. And, more than that, it sounded like Bruce had had a lot of similar dreams when he was a kid. Maybe it was simplistic and childlike to say this, but if Bruce had had nightmares like Tim's, and Bruce was Batman, then maybe it was a sign that Tim was going to be okay despite the nightmares, too.

It was nice, Tim thought again. But still embarrassing— he couldn't believe some of the other things he'd blurted out, like how in his dream he was taking pictures of Batman or how he told Bruce everything about the shoe store robbery. He both was and wasn't surprised when Bruce revealed how much he already knew about that. He wasn't surprised because chances were Nightwing had given Batman a full rundown the same night it happened. But Tim *was* surprised because Bruce had revealed it to him.

It must have been by accident. It was strange to think that Bruce would slip up like that, but as Tim had been learning in the last few months, Batman wasn't perfect. And it *had been* the middle of the night. Obviously, they'd both talked a little too freely.

Still, Tim couldn't deny that he felt better this morning than he had the last time he had a nightmare, back in Metropolis, or really any time before that. He rolled over to look at the clock and found that it was almost eleven, which surprised him; he'd never been able to sleep this much after a nightmare. Good thing it wasn't a school day. Listening to the rain hit the window, he was tempted to burrow deeper under the covers and sleep longer. But he could also smell coffee, and his stomach was rumbling.

From the silence as he approached the kitchen, Tim assumed Alfred was alone. Tim came through the door to find him standing at the island, slicing strawberries into a bowl.

"Good morning, Master Tim," he said. "You're right on time. Brunch

will be ready in just a moment."

"Good morning, Alfred, thanks," said Tim, and then he stopped short on his way to the table because he realized Bruce had been sitting there the whole time. "Oh, hi."

"Good morning," said Bruce. He was smiling, though he looked tired.

He was wearing a suit and using a pencil to complete the crossword puzzle in today's newspaper, the same way he would on a weekday when he was going to the office. For a split-second, Tim worried he'd slept right through Sunday, and it was now Monday. Then he clocked the date on the paper's front page and carried on to the place that had already been set for him at the table, across from Bruce.

"Half-decaf with milk," Alfred announced quietly, placing a mug near Tim's right hand.

"Thanks," Tim repeated. He watched the coffee's reflection of the overhead light jiggle with the slight vibration of Alfred's footsteps as he walked away, then he tried and failed to suppress a yawn.

Bruce's newspaper rustled. He lowered it to the table and filled in another clue. Tim sipped his coffee and watched the rain run down the terrace doors.

The timer on the oven beeped. Tim half-rose from his seat, ready to offer Alfred a hand, but he didn't need it. He pulled the Danishes from the oven and transferred them to a plate before bringing them to the table. There were three: lemon (Bruce), cream cheese (Alfred), and raspberry (Tim). Tim recognized the pastry; they weren't homemade but rather purchased from an independent bakery that Tim knew was just a few blocks away from Wayne Tower.

What's the occasion? Tim wanted to ask, but he didn't.

"Yours spent slightly less time in the oven, Master Tim," Alfred said. "So do let me know if it's not warm enough. We can pop it in the microwave for a few seconds."

"I'm sure it's fine," said Tim, "but thanks anyway."

"It's no trouble at all." Alfred brought the bowl of berries over, along with a big spoon. "Fruit?"

"Yes, please," Tim answered, nudging his bowl a little closer. "Thank

you."

Alfred doled out a few scoops to Tim, then passed the fruit to Bruce. Bruce thanked him as well, and spooned berries into his bowl, which already held yogurt. Homemade granola from a small silver dish went on top.

Bruce pushed the dish in Tim's direction after he was done with it, but Tim shook his head politely. He liked Alfred's granola— until two weeks ago, he'd had some almost every morning. Then Dick waited until he had his mouth full to tell him its main ingredient was dried crickets, and even though Tim knew he was kidding, and even though Alfred threatened to box Dick's ears for the remark, Tim hadn't quite been able to touch the stuff since.

The Danish, however, was delicious. The pastry was flaky perfection, and the filling was sweet but not overly so. Tim limited himself to a few bites at a time, interspersing them with sips of coffee and spoonfuls of berries to make sure he ate slowly. It was a rare treat, and he wanted to enjoy it. He wasn't sure when he'd get another one. The bakeries in the Financial District got away with charging a small fortune for something this good, after all.

Bruce and Alfred chatted about household matters— groceries, schedules, bills, and other boring grown-up things that Tim felt okay about ignoring. When the conversation petered out, they ate in comfortable silence, the shift of Bruce's newspaper the only sound, until—

"Huh," Bruce said.

Tim looked up to see him carefully erasing something he'd written.

"What is it?" asked Alfred.

"Pantyhose shade," said Bruce.

Tim blinked, wondering if he'd zoned out so completely that he'd missed the start of this baffling conversation.

"Ecru," Alfred replied.

Tim had never heard that word before. Was it some kind of code?

"Not this time," said Bruce.

“Nude,” said Alfred.

What the—? thought Tim.

“Nope.”

Alfred hummed, then said, “Navy.”

“Afraid not.”

Tim finally caught on. He asked, “How many letters?”

Bruce sent him a small, pleased look. “Six.”

“Beige…s,” said Tim, realizing halfway through how many letters were in that word.

Bruce chuckled. “No.”

“Brown— no, wait, that’s five, too,” said Tim.

“Sheer, black, pecan, mocha… also five,” Alfred mused.

How many pantyhose shades does Alfred know, Tim wondered. *How many* are *there?*

“Suntan?” he guessed wildly.

“Good one, but no,” said Bruce.

Alfred shook his head. “Well, I’m stumped, my boy,” he said.

Bruce picked up his mug. “Coffee.”

“What?” Tim exclaimed.

“Pray tell, in what universe would *that* be the clue that leads to ‘coffee’?” Alfred asked, sounding just as outraged, only more British about it.

“This one, apparently,” said Bruce with another quiet laugh. “Unless this paper came through an interdimensional portal.”

“Hm. Well, let’s not rule it out, shall we?” Alfred muttered. He stacked his empty fruit bowl onto his plate and got to his feet, extending a hand to take Tim’s dishes as well, since he was also done eating.

But Tim stood before Alfred could make contact. “I got it,” he said,

turning towards the sink with his plate, bowl, and mug in his hands.

“Very well,” he heard Alfred say from behind him. A chair scraped against the floor, and Tim glanced over his shoulder to find Alfred and Bruce on their feet, having one of their silent conversations over the table.

Or maybe it was an argument. Alfred seemed to lose, because he’d disappeared when Tim looked again.

Bruce caught his eye and gave him that covering-up-worry smile that had become kind of common since the Garden Party. Tim turned back around and focused on rinsing out his coffee mug. A second later, Bruce joined him at the sink, setting down his and Alfred’s dishes.

“How are you doing?” he asked quietly. “Did you sleep okay the rest of the night?”

The morning, Tim thought about correcting him, but instead he just nodded. He didn’t really want to talk about it; his feelings on the whole thing were still kind of jumbled.

“That’s good,” said Bruce. “I’m glad.”

Tim nodded again. Thankfully, after a beat, Bruce changed the subject.

“I’m heading downtown to meet with my lawyer this morning.”

“On a Sunday?” Tim couldn’t help asking.

“In my experience, lawyers don’t really understand weekends,” Bruce explained wryly.

“Oh.” Tim finished rinsing Alfred’s plate and dried his hands. He reached under the counter to pull open the dishwasher.

“Also, they’re kind of doing me a last-minute favour,” Bruce went on. “So they couldn’t make time to see me through the week.”

Tim frowned at the dishwasher rack, wondering what Bruce’s point was. Then—

“They’ve agreed to meet with me about this thing with your parents.”

Tim dropped Bruce’s mug. It clattered off the edge of the upper rack, hit the inside of the door, and bounced. Tim winced, but Bruce moved

his foot. The mug hit his sock instead, killing most of its momentum. It rolled harmlessly onto the floor, and Bruce bent over to pick it up.

“Sorry,” he said as he handed it back to Tim. “I know it’s awkward.”

Awkward. Not the word Tim would use, considering his parents could be charged with— wait.

“What... thing, exactly?” he asked, as casually as he could.

Bruce sent him a concerned look. “What happened at the party,” he said like it was obvious. (In retrospect, it was.) “They’re facing consequences from the state, but they were also out of bounds here, so —” To Tim’s surprise, Bruce’s face reddened. “It’s petty, maybe, but still. I want to know what my options are.”

“No, I get it,” said Tim quickly, relieved. “People can’t just barge into your house.”

“Right,” Bruce agreed, but then he hesitated. “There’s... other things I want to talk about with my lawyer, but not before you and I sit down with Lillian.”

Well, that sounds ominous, thought Tim. His plate landed in the lower rack harder than he’d meant it to; his hand was shaking a little.

“The investigation?” he half-asked.

“Exactly,” Bruce half-answered. “Once I get an update on that, well... we’ll see what happens.”

“Cryptic,” Tim accidentally muttered aloud. *(Where* was his filter this morning?)

Bruce, unsurprisingly, heard but, surprisingly, laughed— quiet, but not mocking. “Sorry,” he said again, and it sounded like he meant it. “I know it’s frustrating not having all the answers. But Lillian’s gonna call you this afternoon, okay? Then we’ll talk.”

“Okay,” Tim agreed, though he wasn’t sure what he was agreeing *to.* He just thought—or hoped—it would bring the conversation to a close. He was almost done the dishes, after all, and Bruce had an appointment, so maybe—

“The night of the party, after your parents left,” Bruce said, dashing Tim’s hopes of escaping the kitchen.

He braced himself and leaned against the counter. “Yeah?”

Bruce was looking out the terrace door. “You asked me why I took you in. Why I cared.”

Oh, no. Tim squirmed. “Yeah?” he repeated.

“I should have said: I care because you’re important, Tim. I took you in because you matter.”

Tim had become a statue, unable to move or look away when Bruce turned back to face him.

“You’re a smart, kind, brave, and resourceful kid. But even if none of those things were true, Tim, you still deserve somebody who cares. Somebody who’s here to look out for you.”

Doesn’t have to be you, Tim wanted to say, but he couldn’t figure out how to make himself speak. *You’re the* last *person who should—*

“That’s why,” Bruce concluded. His hand landed on Tim’s marble shoulder. “Sorry if you needed to hear that sooner.”

“Okay,” Tim managed to say. Bruce squeezed his shoulder once, then let go.

“I’d better get moving,” he said. “I won’t be long. Call me if you need me, though.”

“I won’t,” said Tim, because apparently his filter was still MIA.

Bruce frowned and, for some reason, Tim remembered being at galas with his parents, when one of their ancient investors would make an off-colour joke. *Smile and escape,* he thought, pulling the corners of his mouth up. *Smile and escape.*

“I won’t need you,” he explained. “You’ll be gone, what, a few hours? I think I’ll be fine.”

It took a second, but Bruce fell into the role that Tim had assigned him, relaxing and backing off. “Okay. Well, still.”

Tim nodded and turned his back. There was only one dish left to load into the dishwasher, but it was enough; Bruce said his goodbyes and headed to the garage door.

When it closed behind him, Tim… sank. His head rolled forward, his

elbows hitting the strip of countertop in front of the sink. It was wet, and the sleeves of his shirt got very cold. But he didn't move, and eventually they warmed up. He kept his eyes closed and focused on breathing.

He should have seen this coming. Bruce helping him after a nightmare was bigger than waffles, bigger than conversations about cold cases, bigger, even, than rescuing him from his parents at the Garden Party. Of *course* Bruce would say something like this today— like breaking out the s-word (twice!) after the party, it made perfect sense that Bruce would act... fatherly in response to a question that Tim never should have asked.

He doesn't see it, Tim thought, the same way he had right after the Garden Party. *He doesn't want to see it.*

Again, Tim felt the strong urge to run. He wondered how far he could get before Alfred would notice. But where could he go that Bruce wouldn't eventually find him?

Suddenly, fiercely, he wished Dick was at the manor. Even if Tim couldn't tell him everything, he sensed that Dick would somehow understand how Tim was feeling— how it seemed like the walls were closing in around him, or like he was watching a car drive full speed towards a brick wall while helpless to stop it.

He had to fix this, he decided again. But unlike the night of the Garden Party, Tim could feel the pieces coming together this time, a plan starting to form in the back of his mind. He knew he *could* think his way through this now, now that he wasn't so overwhelmed. He could see a path—or part of a path—forward.

And it started with a phone call.

Upstairs in his room with the door closed, Tim held his phone to his ear. Bruce had said Lillian was going to call him, but Tim was too keyed up to wait. When she picked up, he barely got through the basic pleasantries before asking for an update on his case.

She launched into it, and Tim appreciated how she never spoke to him like he was a dumb kid. She quickly recapped the things he already knew: that, even though his parents didn't have custody of him, their parental rights were only suspended temporarily; that they'd agreed to work with Lillian to make changes that would improve the situation and lead to them getting him back; and that, for months now, they

had been due for a hearing to determine whether or not their rights would be re-awarded, but the date kept getting pushed back due to their travels.

Lillian paused after this, then gave him some new information. “Given what happened on Thursday night, we’re going to petition the courts to have their parental rights terminated.”

An unexpected chill ran down Tim’s back. “What does that mean?”

He didn’t catch all of Lillian’s long explanation, but what it boiled down to was that his parents wouldn’t be his parents anymore.

“It’s something we try to avoid doing if we can,” she said. “In situations like yours, it’s a last resort— even though they’ve missed check-ins and haven’t had as many visits with you as they should. But what happened on Thursday was such a clear violation of their agreement to work towards getting you back, we don’t believe they’re acting in good faith anymore.”

“They did it to see me,” Tim heard himself say. He didn’t know why; it just seemed like the right thing to say.

“I know,” Lillian said with sincerity he could feel, even over the phone. “I know it seemed like a nice gesture, and I want to believe their hearts were in the right place, just like you do—”

Tim stopped listening. *Two birds,* he thought. He wasn’t sure, anymore, that his parents’ hearts had had anything to do with why they were at the Garden Party.

“What about Bruce?” he asked, interrupting Lillian mid-sentence.

“Don’t worry about Bruce,” she answered, apparently not bothered at all that Tim cut her off. “We know it was an honest mistake, his inviting your parents to the party.”

Tim nodded, relieved. “That’s good.”

“Yeah.” Lillian paused, and now he could feel her smile. “He’s pretty fond of you, you know.”

Tim didn’t know what to say to that, so he didn’t say anything.

“There’s a chance that your parents will see that terminating their parental rights is for the best,” Lillian said, changing the subject.

“There’s a chance they’ll give them up voluntarily, to allow someone else to step in and adopt you.”

“I want to be emancipated,” Tim blurted out.

Lillian was silent. Tim cleared his throat.

“Sorry,” he said without really knowing why. “Just— I’ve been thinking about it for a while, and—”

“Tim, did something happen?” asked Lillian, taking her turn to interrupt. “Did Bruce say something, or do something to—”

“No,” Tim answered swiftly. “No, not at all. He’s fine, he’s— he’s actually been really nice to me this whole time. Way nicer than— no,” he said again, cutting off that train of thought. “Everything’s fine here, nothing happened.”

“Okay,” said Lillian, but she still sounded troubled. “I believe you. But can you tell me why you want this?”

“I’ve been thinking,” Tim repeated. He swallowed hard and looked out his bedroom window at the rain. “I really think it’s for the best, you know? It’s best if— if I’m on my own.”

There was another pause as Lillian processed this. “You’re not usually eligible until you’re sixteen, Tim,” she said eventually, patronizingly.

Tim’s hand tightened around his phone. “Sometimes the courts grant it early,” he said, forcing his voice to stay steady.

“Sometimes,” Lillian acknowledged, but Tim could tell she was just indulging him now. “Not very often, and usually in very specific circumstances.”

Tim held back a frustrated sigh. This was why he hadn’t told her about his plan before, and why it was probably a bad idea to tell her now. But before, it hadn’t been as urgent. Before, he hadn’t lived at Batman’s house. And if he was going to get out of here before his presence did more damage, Tim needed to try.

“You turn sixteen next summer,” Lillian went on. “If things are going okay with Bruce, why not just wait?”

Tim couldn’t answer that question honestly, so he deflected. “I want to try,” he insisted. “If the courts say no this time, then I’ll wait until my

birthday and try again."

He heard Lillian exhale, long and slow. He braced himself, guessing that he wouldn't like whatever came next.

"I understand. You're used to being on your own," she said, and while her voice was still kind, she also seemed a little sad. "If you're sure this is what you want to do, then of course I will support you. But, Tim. Are you sure?"

Tim was so surprised by her offer of support that it took him a moment to speak. "I'm sure," he said. "I've been thinking about this for a really long time, and I don't want to wait anymore." For some reason the inner corners of his eyes started to sting. "You'll really help me?"

"Of course I'll help you," Lillian said again. Tim heard some typing on her end. "I'm sending you a referral to a free community legal service. There's sometimes a wait, but I hope they can at least meet with you before the holidays and talk to you about your options."

Tim's heart sank. Lillian said some other things about the free law clinic, and the odds of getting a hearing before he turned sixteen, but Tim didn't listen, and he didn't interrupt to tell her that he'd already gone down that road, and it led to a dead end. He also didn't bother mentioning that he'd already visited a family lawyer on his own. He didn't know how she would react to that.

"And when the time comes, I'll go with you to the hearing and give a statement of support," he tuned back in to hear her say.

"You'd do that?" Tim asked, surprised again.

"Yes," Lillian replied. "I'm in your corner, Tim. If this is what you want, then I'm here to help you try and get it."

Tim blinked a few times, because his eyes were suddenly blurry. "Thank you," he said. Then, more hesitantly, he asked, "Are you going to tell Bruce?"

"No," she answered at once, "but if things with the lawyers move forward, he's going to find out."

"Yeah, I know," said Tim, because he figured as much.

"So it might be a good idea to talk to him about this sooner rather

than later," Lillian concluded.

"I will," Tim lied. He had no intention of telling Bruce anything until he had no other choice.

Lillian paused, like maybe she suspected as much, but if she did, she didn't call him out for it, and they hung up a few minutes later.

Tim sat down at his desk and took a deep breath. This wasn't quite the outcome he'd been hoping for when he'd decided to tell Lillian about his plans. He'd hoped that maybe she would be able to speed things up somehow on her end. But clearly not. Now he had no other choice but to answer that follow-up email from Rockwell Family Law that had been sitting in his inbox for more than a month.

It was nice to know that he had Lillian's support, he thought, as he opened the message and started a new reply. And that she'd given her word that she wouldn't tell Bruce. That was enough for now.

He typed up a message to Mr. Rockwell, keeping it as simple and to the point as possible. Yes, he'd like to move forward, and yes, he'd be open to another conversation about this soon.

He tapped 'Send' before he could think too much or feel too guilty. He'd tell Lillian when and if Mr. Rockwell got him a hearing date, he decided. She'd need to be there, after all, to help make it happen.

And he'd tell Bruce... eventually. Maybe.

Less than three hours later—lawyers really *didn't* understand the concept of a weekend—Tim received a response from Mr. Rockwell's assistant. It was an invitation to an appointment at the firm in three days, on Wednesday, October 5th, at 1:30 in the afternoon.

Tim grimaced down at his phone. How was that going to work, with school? He'd been hoping for a weekend appointment, or maybe in the evening, so he could tell Bruce he was going out with his friends or something. He started a reply to the email, asking for a different time, then reconsidered.

An evening or weekend appointment would mean that Bruce and Alfred would know he was going somewhere. There was a chance they wouldn't believe him about where he was going, or wouldn't trust that he could get there on his own. Bruce especially hadn't seemed willing to let Tim out of his sight since the party. What if he insisted on

dropping Tim off and picking him up, the way he had yesterday for W&W at Ives' place? There was no way he wouldn't get suspicious if he did; Mr. Rockwell's office was pretty out of the way in terms of landmarks that would be interesting to Tim and his friends.

It was, however, not far from Gotham Academy. Tim checked the map and found that the bus he needed stopped just a few blocks away from the school. It would be a ten-minute walk to the stop, then just twenty minutes on the bus, and he'd be there. His lunch period ended at 1. He could sneak out between periods, and assuming he could make it back before pick-up and, assuming he told the office a convincing story...

It'd been a while since he'd skipped school, and even longer since he'd had to make up an excuse that wouldn't result in a grown-up getting in trouble for it. Any number of things could go wrong; the receptionist might not believe him, and if she called Bruce on the spot to confirm Tim's story, there was no way he could wriggle out of it. Bruce would know that he'd skipped school, and he'd no doubt sit Tim down and ask for an explanation. Worse, Tim's absence might even count against Bruce in terms of the investigation that Lillian and her bosses were conducting.

But then again, Tim had lied to the office at Gotham Academy for years, and they'd never once called Jack or Janet to confirm his story. And with what Lillian had just told him about the Garden Party invite being considered an 'honest mistake', well, Tim felt pretty good about those odds, too. He couldn't remember seeing anything in any of his other foster parents' files about facing repercussions because Tim skipped school.

It was risky. But if he got it right, he could get to Mr. Rockwell's office and get back without Bruce even knowing he was gone. If he got it wrong, well... he'd just have to cross that bridge if he got there.

His heart in his throat, Tim typed, *Yes. See you at 1:30 on Wednesday.*

Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

> Batman broods his way into finding a new lead in the case of the LexCorp Four. Tim stays up way too late (again).
>
> *The caller ID this afternoon had read* Gotham Academy Reception. *His heartbeat had changed.*
>
> *"Hope I didn't catch you in the car, Mr. Wayne. Tim said you were heading back to the office after his doctor's appointment."*
>
> *In that moment, he made a decision. He chose to play along.*

Steam rose from the sidewalk vent at 5th Street and Clancy Boulevard. In the stillness after midnight on this first frosty night of autumn, the vent's warm, metallic-scented air rose almost straight up, becoming an opaque column of cloud. During the day, it would move— stirred by the currents of passing cars and people. During the day, pedestrians would step through it without a second thought. But not at this time of night. Not in Gotham City.

Batman watched from a gargoyle a few storeys up. A group of GCU students stumbling out of a club stopped dead in their tracks as they rounded the corner on Clancy and came face-to-face with the cloud of vapour. Then one looked both ways and stepped out onto the road rather than pass through it. The others followed him single-file, laughing like they knew it was silly, like they were participating in a superstitious ritual, but not one of them changed route. The last in their group—short, dark-haired, wearing a red coat—stared intently into the mist for a few seconds before following, like he was desperately curious to know what it was he was avoiding.

Tim skipped school today.

The tipsy students continued down Clancy to the off-campus GCU residence at 7th, weaving left to right across the wide sidewalks. Batman watched them—and watched around them—until they were inside. No one followed them, no one jumped them, no one hurt them.

He returned his gaze to the cloud that hovered above the sidewalk. In the yellowish streetlight, there was no seeing through it. Someone or

something could be rising from that vent right this moment, and he wouldn't know.

A food delivery person drew near, his eyes glued to his phone as he walked his electric bicycle along the sidewalk. Still, he swerved to the left, passing the vent on the inside, close to the building. He disappeared from Batman's sight completely for almost two full seconds before emerging on the other side of the mist.

It was Wednesday— well, Thursday now. Four days had passed since Tim's nightmare on Saturday night, a full week since the Garden Party.

A siren chirped. Batman cocked his head to listen, but there was nothing further. Then lights caught his eye— an ambulance, turning up Clancy without its siren. The cloud over the sidewalk vent flickered stark white and cherry red as the vehicle sped past on its way to Gotham Memorial.

He heard loud voices and a burst of guitar and drums. A different club had opened its doors, spilling another group of college students onto 5th Street, drunker than the last. Two wore Central City Cougars hats. They turned onto Clancy and stopped short at the mist, just as the others had. Then the two exchanged a glance and raced through the cloud, despite shouts of protest from their friends.

They disappeared for a second, then reappeared coughing.

Batman pushed his weight forward. Scarecrow toxin? Joker gas?

"Dude! That *stinks!* Why did we do that?"

"That was the grossest thing I've ever done! I need a fucking shower!"

Batman settled back on his perch and watched the Cougars fans egg on their friends to also pass through the cloud. Two did, three did not. Laughing, they all continued up Clancy to the residence, safe and carefree the way young people should be.

The caller ID this afternoon had read *Gotham Academy Reception.* His heartbeat had changed.

"Hope I didn't catch you in the car, Mr. Wayne. Tim said you were heading back to the office after his doctor's appointment."

In that moment, he made a decision. He chose to play along.

“I don’t want to make a big deal out of this, because I’m sure it was just a mistake, but you really must provide Tim with a note or accompany him inside when you drop him off.”

Batman swung around to a gargoyle on the other side of the building. Webber Street ran parallel to Clancy, and one block made a big difference. The clubs at this corner of 5th were rougher, rowdier. Bouncers turned a blind eye to the dealers who strutted along the lines waiting to get in, doling out baggies in exchange for bills.

The Falcones owned this strip. Batman had been coming here a few times a week for the last several months, watching for familiar faces, waiting for the right time to make a move. So far, no one associated with LexCorp had been here. At least not while Batman was looking. The men who’d broken into AJ’s apartment were long gone as well, and nobody was talking.

“How was school?” he’d asked Tim at dinner.

Tim had shrugged. “It was okay. Pretty boring.”

He made another decision. “Nothing exciting happened at all?”

“Well, Mr. Brooks accidentally said Y equals M *sex* plus B instead of M *X* plus B, and I don’t think he’ll ever live it down.”

We both know you weren’t in math class today.

Down on the strip, someone was looking up. She murmured something to the man waiting in line with her, then walked away, wobbling on her stilettos. She turned north on Webber. Threw another glance up at Batman’s gargoyle. Took a few more unsteady steps, looked up again.

Batman understood. Silently, he followed.

The woman was waiting for him in an empty dead-end alley. No sign of an ambush. She stood her ground as he drew near, though he could see the slight tremor in her knees, her hands.

“Lightfoot,” she said.

He checked himself, pulling back. “Officer.”

She instantly relaxed. “Oh, thank God. I wasn’t sure you would know that one.”

“Gordon gives me the codewords a month in advance,” Batman

explained. “What can I do for you?”

She laughed, still a little shaky. “Well, ain’t that a hell of an offer,” she said. “My name’s D’Angelo, by the way. Tracey D’Angelo. And you got it backwards. I can do something for you.”

Batman tilted his head to show he was listening. D’Angelo started to pace, her stilettos somehow steady on the uneven pavement.

“I’ve been undercover with the Falcones for a while,” she said. “Ever since the Maronis killed one of their runners, the mood’s been pretty grim. They figure somebody leaked our routes to Maroni, so nobody’s been talking.”

Batman noted the pronoun but let it pass without comment.

“This past week or so, there’s been an energy shift. People are suddenly upbeat. Chatty, even. I’ve been working on a guy, Tommy Dzien. Used to run with Gabe Lavaste, if you remember him.”

Batman nodded. He remembered the last time he saw Lavaste— on television outside the courthouse with a new defence attorney paid for by the Wayne Foundation. He’d just accepted a plea deal that would send him to prison for twenty-five years but with the possibility of parole after sixteen. By then, all but one of his grandkids would be legal adults.

“Tommy finally told me what everybody’s been all smiles about,” D’Angelo continued. “Apparently, the higher-ups are working on a deal that’ll put us back on top and drive the Maronis out of the drug business once and for all.”

“New supplier?” Batman guessed, but D’Angelo shook her head.

“New equipment,” she corrected him. “Some kind of device. I don’t know much about it, but word is it’s coming in from Metropolis, and it’s gonna revolutionize the drug trade— those are Tommy’s words.”

“Metropolis,” Batman repeated.

“Yeah. Part of what they’re bragging about is doing all this right under Superman’s nose.”

Batman let that pass without comment, too. “What else can you tell me?”

D'Angelo shrugged. "That's all I got."

"Who else have you told?"

She shook her head. "Haven't even reported to my superiors yet."

"Don't," Batman advised. "I'll get Gordon to follow up with you directly."

"Okay," said D'Angelo, sounding shaky again. "Mind if I ask why?"

"Ongoing investigation," said Batman shortly, pulling his grapnel gun from his belt. "Stay safe, Officer."

He launched himself towards the roof before she could say more. His mind was already racing, connecting dots. Equipment from Metropolis to revolutionize the drug trade? It was the generator project from LexCorp. It had to be.

He already had evidence that proved LexCorp was in business with the Falcones, and he knew from the GCPD's interviews with AJ that the generator could theoretically reproduce drugs by duplicating basic components. Of course, the intention of the machine was to support small clinics in rural areas in case of an outbreak, not to mass produce street drugs cheaply, but if the generator could do what it promised, Batman could see why the Falcones would want it.

And from the change in attitude, it seemed like they were pretty sure they were gonna get it.

But how? The scientists who'd been leading the project were dead— quite possibly by the Falcones' own hand. And given what LexCorp had done to try and get AJ on board, it didn't seem like Cronin knew enough about the generator project to complete it on his own. It was possible he'd acquired enough information from stealing AJ's notes about the concept, but even AJ admitted that he had nothing solid. The generator had been a pipe dream to him— something that he and Dr. Rota had conceptualized years ago without any real ideas for how to make it happen.

So, what changed? Why were the Falcones suddenly optimistic, sure that it would soon be finished and in their hands?

Batman didn't know. But these questions were easier than the ones that had chased each other around his head since Gotham Academy called Bruce Wayne's cell phone this afternoon, so he got to work.

When he returned to the Cave a few hours later, he pulled off the cape and cowl and went straight to the Batcomputer. It was a wasted night. His snitches had told him nothing. Gordon had nothing. He'd gotten nowhere.

The manor's monitoring software was running on one screen. He watched it for a moment—just to be sure—then returned his attention to the case file for the LexCorp Four. He reread everything he had about the generator, but it wasn't much. It wasn't enough.

He leaned back in the computer chair, thinking hard. After a moment, he activated the computer's voice recorder. He closed his eyes and spoke aloud.

"Theory one: the Falcones approach Rota to make a deal for LexCorp's generator device. She refuses. The Falcones murder her former team one by one as a means of convincing her to cooperate.

"Problem: the Falcones would have no incentive to kill Rota herself, as she is the expert in the generator, which they wish to acquire.

"Theory two: the Falcones approach Rota to make a deal for the generator. She refuses, and the Falcones murder her former colleagues to convince her. Rota is not intimidated and instead threatens to go to the police. The Falcones then murder her to silence her.

"Problem: Rota had plenty of time to see the writing on the wall and make a move. She didn't.

"Theory three: the Falcones have some kind of leverage on Rota. They approach her to make a deal for the generator and attempt to blackmail her into accepting it.

"Problem: In this case, why would the Falcones bother killing her former team members at all, let alone her?

"Theory four: LexCorp used the Falcones as hired muscle, to silence Rota and her former team for something with regard to the generator.

"Problem: Why? Again, there is no evidence of any of the victims reaching out to law enforcement or journalists to blow the whistle on LexCorp for any reason.

"Another problem: Why would the Falcones now be convinced that they're going to get the generator? Did LexCorp promise it to them, if

they took care of Rota? But, again, Rota is the expert on the generator project. If the Falcones want the generator finished, they need Rota alive and working, not—"

He blew out a breath. "Stop recording."

The Batcomputer beeped. He rested his elbows on the desk and shook his head. None of it made any sense. Every time he thought he was getting somewhere with this case, he hit a dead end. Something wasn't adding up, and he wasn't going to solve it by sitting here staring at his notes some more. He needed fresh intel, fresh eyes.

As if on cue, something on the far right monitor caught his attention. It was the communications dashboard, usually minimized to one corner. He almost never looked at it; with Nightwing as his only local ally active in the field these days, he preferred to reach out directly on their shared comm frequency when he needed something. But the dashboard still lived on the screen, showing agents that were available. Batgirl was still on the list— and her icon had just turned green. He selected her name and started a video call before he could think twice.

Barbara picked up almost immediately. Behind her, her apartment was fully illuminated.

"Trouble sleeping?" Bruce greeted her.

"Normal people say hello," she replied with a slight smile, "but yes. You?"

"Just got back." He hesitated. This had seemed like a better idea a few minutes ago. "Thank you for your help with Riddler last weekend. I couldn't have rounded up his men so quickly without you."

"Yeah," said Barbara after a pause, like she was feeling awkward, too.

"It's... always nice," Bruce went on clumsily, "to have you along on a case."

"Yeah," she said again.

"Like— well. A little like old times."

Her hand came into frame. She rubbed the side of her neck. Bruce felt his face heat. The words were probably all wrong. He cleared his throat and tried again, with a subject change for good measure.

“I wondered if you could do me another favour. For a case I have open right now.”

Barbara sat up a little straighter. “Sure,” she said, surprisingly eager. “What do you need?”

Relieved, Bruce summarized the LexCorp Four case details— from the first suspicious death to tonight’s possible revelation about the Falcones’ involvement.

“I’ll grant you access to the full file, so you can read it all yourself,” he said when he realized he’d been talking for far too long.

“It’s adorable that you think I need you to do that,” Barbara commented, “but thank you.”

Bruce huffed a laugh. Of course she could get into the system whenever she wanted. “Just let me live in the illusion,” he said.

Barbara laughed as well. “So what’s the next step? What favour do you need from me?”

“Well, think you can get into LexCorp’s servers?” Bruce asked.

“Oh, so just a small favour then,” said Barbara.

Bruce smiled at this but didn’t answer. He could tell she was thinking it over.

“I suppose I could try,” she said after a minute. “But what exactly are you hoping to find? I highly doubt that the Falcones would have issued LexCorp a Purchase Order.”

“Probably not,” Bruce agreed. “But I’ll take anything you can find about the generator— specs, diagrams, plans. Anything that might tell me how it works and what it can actually do.”

“Assuming it does anything,” Barbara countered. “With their lead scientist gone…”

“I know,” Bruce sighed. “But if there’s a chance this thing is gonna hit the streets here in Gotham, I’d like to be ready.”

“Fair enough.” Barbara pushed up her glasses. “Give me a day or two to come up with a game plan. I’ll let you know how it goes.”

“Thanks, Batgirl,” said Bruce.

The name had slipped out before he could stop it. Chagrined, he remembered her telling him that she didn't want to be called that anymore, that she didn't think she could be Batgirl after what the Joker did to her.

"Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that," said Barbara instead of reaming him out.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I've been thinking about a new name. If you're— if that's okay?"

"If that's— uh, yeah," Bruce said, caught off-guard. He hadn't expected her to want a new callsign, or even really need one, given that she only helped him out once in a while. "What is it?"

Barbara's glasses reflected the lit-up screen of her computer as she took a deep breath. "Oracle," she said.

Bruce didn't answer right away, and she carried on in a rush. "I was thinking about how I told you where to go to find Riddler's crew last weekend. It was almost like predicting the future. Then I thought about how much I was able to see— through, like, traffic cams, and CCTV, and what have you. So— yeah," she ended, vague and abrupt. She shrugged. "What do you think?"

Bruce smiled. "I like it."

Her shoulders relaxed. Her voice was small and hopeful. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Bruce repeated firmly.

"Good. Okay. Great." She nodded, then went back to business. "I'll see what I can do on the LexCorp servers for you. No promises, but I'll try."

"Thank you, Oracle," said Bruce deliberately.

"Goodnight, Batman," Barbara replied, and she ended the call.

He stared at the blank screen for a moment, then went to the communications dashboard to make the change. But, of course, she'd already beaten him to it. He huffed a laugh and leaned back in his chair, feeling surprisingly hopeful.

Fresh eyes, he thought again. Barbara's skills and insight on the case

could be exactly what he needed to crack it.

But the optimism didn't last as he turned to the monitor on the left. The majority of the screen was a black and white shot of the bedroom hallway, lit by infrared security cameras. In the lower right, the audio surveillance tracks scrolled by. All the doors were closed; everything was quiet.

Tim skipped school today, and then he lied about it.

It was, to Bruce's knowledge, the first time Tim had told him an outright lie. Sure, Tim hadn't always been completely honest with him, like the night he messed with the security system and allowed Bruce to assume he was sneaking out to see his parents. And he'd concealed the shoe store robbery for weeks, which could be counted as a lie of omission. He was a secretive kid. He was guarded, and he had good reason to be. He didn't trust easily. But he wasn't dishonest — or so Bruce had thought.

He thought back to the conversation he had with the school receptionist. She'd been so certain that Tim had told her the truth about having a doctor's appointment that she didn't even ask Bruce to confirm where Tim had been when he missed his afternoon classes. She'd called him *fait accompli,* no doubt in her mind: Tim had missed his classes because ditzy, out-of-touch Bruce Wayne forgot that school rules also applied to his kids.

(He had to admit it wasn't so different from the excuses that he himself had used whenever Jason or Dick needed to disappear.)

Then Bruce thought about dinner, about how he'd asked Tim about school and Tim had lied so smoothly about his math teacher's blunder. Something was bothering Bruce about both those moments. It wasn't just the lies, it was—

"Oh," Bruce said aloud as he finally put the pieces together.

It wasn't just the lies, it was the fact that he'd heard Tim talk like this before, at formal events where he'd crossed paths with the Drakes. Tim would be standing beside his mother or father, smiling like a mannequin in a spotless tux. Then his parents would prompt him, and Tim would share something about a class where his grades were high or a club that he was heavily involved with. Every story made him look good but made his parents look better.

Was any of it true? Had he ever tried out for the seventh grade

football team? Had he really taken over the Debate Club when Marcie Davenport got mono halfway through the semester? Was he truly the youngest student to win first prize at Gotham Academy's Science Fair two years running?

Or was Tim just really good at telling adults what they wanted to hear?

His Child Services file made no mention of this particular pattern of behaviour. In fact, Lillian's notes on Tim's past truancy described him as indifferent about the whole thing. There were no phoney excuses to his foster parents, no false anecdotes to the school. As far as Bruce could tell, Tim didn't even try to explain or excuse the behaviour. It seemed like he simply didn't care. So maybe Tim *was* outright dishonest, but he hadn't cared enough to be until now; Bruce hadn't seen that side of him thus far.

What changed? Bruce wondered with a strange sense of déjà vu. In the last week, the Falcones had gone from tight-lipped to giddy, and Tim had started lying to him.

He remembered what Lillian had said the night of the Garden Party, and during the conversations they'd had since about the possibility of adoption. She'd thought, like Bruce, that Tim was adjusting to the idea that he had support now— that he had somebody in his corner. He'd certainly seemed willing to be vulnerable since that night, showing emotion when he was usually so reserved, and accepting physical comfort when normally he would hesitate. Then he'd had that nightmare, and Bruce saw him even more vulnerable, though not entirely by choice.

Was it just too much too fast? Tim had been overwhelmed at the party — by his parents dropping in, by the news of Bruce being under investigation. And the nightmare a few days later had been awful, no doubt, and he was used to dealing with them alone. Bruce had tried to be supportive in the moment and the morning after, but Tim obviously didn't like feeling weak. Maybe now he was finding a way to exert control over his situation by skipping school and by lying to Bruce.

It was one theory, at least.

Bruce stared at Tim's closed bedroom door on the screen, wondering if he'd made the right call earlier by letting it slide. Maybe he should have told the receptionist that Tim hadn't been with him. Maybe he

should have revealed the phone call to Tim at dinner. Maybe he should have demanded an explanation for why Tim skipped most of his afternoon classes. Maybe he should have told him he was grounded this weekend, or taken away other privileges.

But none of that would have prompted Tim to explain the behaviour to him. And Bruce was much more worried about Tim's motivations than he was interested in punishing Tim for acting out.

Maybe it was like the robbery at the shoe store, he thought. Maybe if he let it go a little and showed that he could be trusted, maybe Tim would come to him willingly without Bruce having to chase him down.

(But if Tim skipped school again... well, that would be a different story.)

He pulled his attention away from the security footage and back to the LexCorp Four case file, but his eyelids were getting heavy. He was too tired to focus. He stood up from the desk instead and finished removing the suit on his way to the change room in the corner.

The shower woke him up enough to keep vigil the rest of the night. Running a towel over his hair, he returned to the computer to put it in standby mode, but he paused when he saw the audio sensors were picking something up in the hall. Immediately thinking of Saturday night, he readied himself to run upstairs, but after just a few seconds, Tim's bedroom door cracked open. Slowly, Tim's head emerged into the hall, facing away from the camera, towards Bruce's bedroom. He stayed still for a long moment, clearly listening, then slipped across the hall to the bathroom.

Bruce sighed and shook his head, because Tim was still wearing the same clothes he'd worn to dinner. It was obvious he hadn't been to bed yet.

He waited to make sure Tim came back, noting how Tim turned the bathroom light out before opening the door. He crossed the hall again, his feet hardly triggering the sensitive mics at ground level. Bruce zoomed in on the gap at the bottom of the bedroom door as Tim closed it. The audio sensors spiked with a tiny thump, and then the infrared camera picked up a subtle change in light. It bled out around an obstruction for just a few seconds before there was a rustle of fabric, and the light disappeared.

Bruce zoomed out again and watched the hall for a handful of

seconds.

Is this the right decision?

Then he moved— up the stairs, through his study, down the hall, until he was in front of Tim's pillow-blocked door.

I don't know.

He knocked.

The knock was quiet, just barely audible. Still, Tim jumped, his head swivelling towards the door so fast he might have made himself a little dizzy. He certainly felt off-kilter as he glanced at his alarm clock —*4:27*—and swallowed down déjà vu.

Bruce knocked again. Tim closed his eyes and sighed, but got to his feet and crossed the room. He pulled the pillow away from the base of the door. Now his light was fully visible in the hall, but it didn't matter anymore.

It really did feel familiar, opening the door to find Batman in pyjamas in the hall. The only difference between the last time this happened and this time was that Bruce was wearing long sleeves. Also, Tim had a better idea of what he was in for.

"Hi," he said meekly, breaking the awkward silence.

"Hey, Tim," Bruce replied, his tone and expression unreadable. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Past my bedtime," Tim guessed.

"By quite a lot," Bruce agreed. Then, unexpectedly, he smiled. "Can I come in for a minute?"

Wordlessly, Tim moved aside. Bruce didn't go for the computer chair like last time, though. Instead, he sat on the window seat, facing Tim's bed. Tim followed, eyes on the floor, and sank onto the mattress opposite him.

"I didn't expect to be out this late," Bruce began. "My clients suggested a nightcap... or three. I just got home and heard you go across the hall. Saw your light."

Tim knew Bruce was lying, of course. There'd been no client dinner

and definitely no drinks. But Batman had been busy, according to the police scanner, breaking up an illegal poker game near the Iceberg Lounge. Tim chanced a glance up. It must have gone okay, because Bruce didn't have a scratch on him, unlike the last few times they had conversations in the middle of the night.

But he was looking at Tim with his eyebrows raised slightly as if to say, *That's my phoney excuse; what's yours?*

Tim didn't have one. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'll go to bed right now."

Bruce's face changed— his eyebrows sank, and he frowned with more of that not-quite-hidden worry that was unfortunately getting to be familiar. Tim didn't know why he'd be worried by an apology and an offer to rectify the situation, but apparently he was.

After a moment of silence he asked, "Is there anything you want to tell me, Tim?"

Oh, boy. Tim's eyes dropped back to the floor.

There were lots of things he *could* tell Bruce, but nothing he particularly *wanted* to tell him. He could start with how he'd snuck off campus today to meet with Mr. Rockwell to move forward with his emancipation. Or, there was the intel Tim was hoarding about Batman's LexCorp serial killer case, since he still hadn't figured out how to get it to Commissioner Gordon or Nightwing. And there was also the *other* intel Tim was sitting on, about his parents' possible role in the LexCorp murders, which he'd only give up under threat of death or dismemberment. And then there was the classic: *Hi, Batman, I'm your stalker-slash-informant, what's up?* That, of course, was off the table.

"No," Tim said without looking up. He almost added *sir*— an old habit he hadn't felt the need to practice for quite some time.

Fortunately, Bruce didn't seem to notice. Unfortunately, Bruce wasn't deterred. "Can you tell me why you're up this late?" he tried. When Tim didn't answer, he added, "I'm not angry. I just want to know if there's a particular reason."

Tim shook his head. After a beat, he heard Bruce exhale, slow and steady.

"If you're... afraid to go to sleep," he said haltingly, and *that* made Tim look up in alarm. "It's nothing to be ashamed of."

“I’m not afraid,” Tim said honestly.

“Maybe *afraid* isn’t the right word,” Bruce said, catching and holding his eye. “But you’re putting off going to bed, aren’t you?”

Tim nodded, honest again.

“You must have a lot on your mind,” Bruce guessed.

Tim swallowed but otherwise didn’t let himself react.

“Remember what I said the other night,” Bruce added, after waiting a few seconds to make sure Tim wasn’t going to say something. “You can tell me anything. I’m here to listen. Okay?”

“Okay,” Tim echoed in relief, because it felt like the interrogation was wrapping up.

But Bruce didn’t get to his feet yet. Tim bounced his right leg without really meaning to, then forced it to stay still when Bruce noticed.

“You know, I’ve been thinking,” Bruce said, suddenly conversational.

New tactic, Tim thought. He steeled himself.

“You know the way you told me you feel during your nightmares? That moment where you’re awake enough to know it’s a dream, but not awake enough to stop it?”

Tim nodded, baffled.

“Sometimes, what breaks me out of my bad dreams is knowing what I’d do if it was really happening,” Bruce said. “I think that might help you, too.”

“What might?” Tim asked. He was beyond wary.

“Preparation,” Bruce answered. His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed, then he went on in a rush. “Tim, I’d like to teach you some self-defence. It lets you slow down and practice reactions to dangerous situations, so you’re ready if one comes your way. I think it might help with the dreams, and— and if you’re ever in another—” He stopped and exhaled through his nose. “I think it’ll help. If you want. If you’re interested.”

Tim wondered if he’d fallen asleep at some point in the last few minutes. *Was Bruce seriously offering…?*

“You can teach me?” he heard his own voice say, though he didn’t mean to speak.

“It’s a hobby,” Bruce explained, too quickly and too casually. “I’m no expert—”

Tim reacted again without meaning to, letting out a puff of air that might have been the precursor to a laugh.

“So if you wanted to enrol in a class, you could. Maybe karate or hapkido. Whatever you like.”

“You,” Tim decided, because on the slim chance that this wasn’t a dream, Tim wasn’t going to screw it up. No way he was going to take a martial arts class when one-on-one lessons from Batman were on the table.

“Me what?” said Bruce, obviously not understanding.

“You can teach me,” Tim repeated. It wasn’t a question this time, though Bruce reacted like it was.

“Yeah,” he said. He didn’t look away, but he licked his lips and swallowed— an uncharacteristic tell. He was nervous. “How do you feel about that?”

Tim tried to think about it logically. He made a valiant effort to remember all the things he was dealing with—how he was planning to get out of Wayne Manor and out of the foster system for good; how he was hoarding intel about an active serial killer case; how his parents were possibly involved—but his brain was full of fog.

And, like a neon sign cutting through the mist: *Batman is offering to teach you how to fight.*

“When can we start?” he asked.

Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

> Tim's self-defence lesson goes off the rails when Dick drops by for a surprise visit. Bruce lets himself wonder about a few things, and Alfred worries about Tim.
>
> *“Hey, guys,” Dick said, deceptively casual. “What are we doing?”*
>
> *Bruce heard:* What are *you* doing?

Chapter Notes

> Posting a day late because Monday was a holiday, and I straight-up forgot yesterday was Tuesday! Sorry to keep you waiting.

The answer to Tim’s question, it turned out, was Friday afternoon. Tim’s teachers had a professional development day, and Bruce had an unskippable meeting at the office in the morning, but he was back in time for lunch, and after a sandwich, Tim found himself in the same gym where he’d been working on his back handspring with Dick.

He was wearing a pair of stretchy black pants and navy blue basketball shorts that had appeared in his laundry pile that morning, along with a t-shirt that he usually slept in. It used to be his dad’s, and the screen print was so old he’d never known what it was supposed to look like, but it was comfy and he could move in it, so it seemed appropriate. Bruce wore dark green sweatpants and a white tank top under a grey zip-up hoodie— everything was at least a size too big. Tim knew it was to hide his muscle mass and make him look smaller, but it was only half-working. As Bruce demonstrated a few simple maneuvers, Tim couldn’t help but see Batman.

“Ready to try it?” Bruce said, and Tim realized he hadn’t heard a single word he’d said.

“I— sorry,” Tim replied, his face going warm. “No, I wasn’t paying attention. Sorry.”

He expected Bruce to sigh or roll his eyes or get mad, but he didn’t. He just started over, from the top, and this time Tim actually absorbed it.

“I learned this in gym class at GCHS last year,” he realized.

“Good,” said Bruce, then he frowned. “I mean, not *good,* but— you know what I mean.”

“Yeah,” Tim said, huffing a laugh.

They practised it a few times, anyway, Tim’s foot landing on Bruce’s instep and his elbow bumping into Bruce’s (ridiculously hard) abdomen in order to break free from his (very loose) hold.

“Good,” Bruce said again, stepping back. “I’d say you’ve more or less mastered that.”

Tim felt the corners of his mouth turn up. His face was a little hot again. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Bruce affirmed, like it wasn’t a *huge fucking deal* for Batman to say something like that.

But Bruce wasn’t done talking, and it got better from there. “Ready to try an attack from the front?”

Tim nodded eagerly, and Bruce took another step back.

“Okay. I’m going to take a swing. As I do, I want you to watch closely. You’re looking for the point in my movement where the inner part of my upper arm is exposed, okay?”

Tim nodded again, but it was a little more apprehensive this time.

“I promise I won’t actually hit you,” Bruce said quickly, moving even further away.

“Yeah, I know you won’t,” Tim assured him— a little too confidently, because Bruce paused, his eyes narrowing for a second before his expression cleared.

“Most people don’t know how to fight,” he went on. “So when they take a swing, they take a *big* swing. Real fighters call that a haymaker. It does a lot of damage if it connects, but it expends a ton of energy and needs a big wind-up. That leaves them open for an attack of opportunity.”

Tim was frowning, and Bruce noticed. “Sorry, is this too much? Do you want to stop?”

“No,” Tim half-exclaimed. “No,” he repeated more calmly. “I was just thinking— if somebody’s trying to hit me, wouldn’t it make more

sense to duck?"

Bruce seemed pleased by the question, though Tim couldn't imagine why. "Sure," he acknowledged, "but ducking takes good timing, and it can leave you vulnerable. Plus, what's to stop them from just swinging again if they miss the first time?"

"Good point," Tim had to admit.

Bruce turned his arm over and indicated the inside of his bicep. *"This* is where you want to aim," he said. "There are some pretty major nerves that run through this part of the arm, so if you can hit it just right, it can cause a surprising amount of pain. Think of what it's like to hit your funny bone."

"Ow," Tim agreed.

"Exactly," Bruce nodded. "That can distract your opponent long enough for you to run away or call for help."

"Okay," said Tim, "but... hit it it with what?"

"For today, let's go with the heel of your hand, but you could also use your elbow."

"My elbow?" Tim repeated, thrown.

"Elbows are strong," Bruce explained, holding his forearm up horizontally to demonstrate. "They can do a lot of damage. And they're pointy. They can even break the skin. Plus, the bones in your arm are a lot sturdier than those in your hand. They're harder to break when you're attacking."

Tim realized that, before today, he'd never thought about elbows this much. "Huh."

Bruce held for a beat like he was waiting for another question. When it didn't come, he took yet another step back and raised his right arm. He didn't close his hand into a fist, leaving it rather limp, like a marionette with a broken string.

"Okay, watch closely, and say 'stop' when you think you can get a clear shot at that spot I showed you," he instructed.

Tim nodded and fixed his attention on Bruce's arm, watching it get closer, though it was still more than a foot away.

Until— “Stop!”

Bruce froze—Batman had impeccable reflexes, of course—and he smiled. “Good,” he said again.

Tim knew his face was beet red, but he didn’t care. He grinned back, and Bruce seemed almost relieved as he let his arm drop and stepped forward again.

“Now, let’s talk about palm-heel strikes,” he said.

It was unusual—but not that unusual—that Alfred was not in the kitchen when Dick arrived. After all, it was a Friday afternoon, and he hadn’t called ahead. But he’d heard through the grapevine that Tim had a PD day, and Dick been staying in Gotham on-and-off lately, but he’d barely been to the manor. He’d been downstairs a few times, but not upstairs, and that was a shame. The groceries at his safehouse left *a lot* to be desired.

As he wandered the kitchen, gathering up some of the good snacks to take with him when he left, he wondered where Tim was. He hoped he was doing okay. Bruce had given Dick a rundown of what happened at the Garden Party last week, and Alfred was providing Dick with near-daily updates. Dick knew that Tim skipped school on Wednesday and (mostly) got away with it. Dick knew that Bruce was worried it would happen again, but Dick also knew that it wouldn’t. Tim was a smart cookie. No doubt he already knew what Dick had learned the hard way: name-dropping Brucie Wayne to get out of trouble was a card you only got to play once.

But Dick could see where Tim was coming from and why he’d taken off. Even without being in the manor, Dick knew Bruce was tense. And when Bruce was tense, he got paranoid. And when Bruce got paranoid, well, a teenager’s freedom was the first thing to go. Dick had learned *that* the hard way, too.

So, here he was, hoping to spend some one-on-one time with Tim away from Bruce and Alfred’s worrying, and away from the ghost of the Drakes that was lingering in the manor after the Garden Party. Maybe Tim would be up for working on his gymnastics. He’d more or less mastered the walkover now, so he was getting closer to his goal of a back handspring. And that, Dick figured, would be a pretty good distraction from everything else that was going on.

But the kitchen was empty. So was the living room. So was Tim’s

darkroom.

“Huh,” Dick said to himself as he wandered around the rest of the main floor. The entire family wing was silent, and he’d always found that a little eerie.

Even the door to Alfred’s suite of rooms was closed. Dick didn’t knock, knowing that he only shut it when he was out or didn’t want to be disturbed.

Frowning, Dick climbed the back stairs. The hall up here was also deserted, but the door to Bruce’s study was ajar. Dick approached, knocked softly on the frame, and nudged it open a little wider when there was no answer.

“Bruce?” he called, noticing a second too late that he was talking to an empty room.

His eyes landed on the grandfather clock. He considered, then quickly dismissed, the possibility that Bruce was down there. Not if Tim was home. And he certainly wouldn’t be down there *with* Tim— not even if Tim had spontaneously decided to come clean and tell him he knew the big secret. And if *that* had happened, well, Dick hoped Bruce would at least have the sense to talk to him before doing something as stupid as letting Tim into the Batcave. God knew how well that went last time.

After checking the bedroom hallway, it occurred to him that Bruce and Tim might not be home. Maybe they’d stepped out to run some errands or to do something fun before dinner. Maybe Alfred had gone with them, and if not, that would also explain why Alfred was resting — he could only really be guaranteed of some peace and quiet when the manor was empty.

Dick pulled his phone out of his pocket and opened his conversation with Tim as he walked to his old bedroom. *Hey!* he typed. *Alfred said you have a PD day. I’m in Gotham, I thought we could hang out. Are you busy?*

Tim was generally a quick texter-backer, so Dick set his phone down on the dresser without locking it, then shut the door and opened the bottom drawer. He pulled out the set of workout clothes he kept up here and pushed the drawer closed with his foot just as his phone buzzed. Smiling, he picked it up, but the alert wasn’t a message from Tim. It was a promotional email from the sushi restaurant near his apartment in Blüdhaven. He dismissed the notification, but didn’t

delete the email. (Two-for-one hand rolls was definitely an offer he'd take them up on, and soon.)

He thought for a moment, then decided there was no reason he couldn't go to the gym himself and play around on the mats a little while he was waiting for Tim to get back to him. He unbuttoned his collared shirt and pulled it off, draping it over the desk chair before picking up the sleeveless purple t-shirt he'd taken from the drawer a minute ago. He paired it with neon pink leggings and bright green shorts.

He went back downstairs to fill up a water bottle. His message to Tim hadn't even been marked as 'read' yet. Dick frowned at the phone for a moment like that would help, then shrugged and headed towards the manor's public wing.

He was queuing up his workout playlist—starting with the catchy number that'd been in his head for the last two days—as he walked up to the mahogany double doors of the ballroom that Bruce had converted into a fitness room years ago. The doors were partially open.

What Dick heard from inside the room made him stop dead in his tracks.

Tim was just starting to get the hang of holding his hand the right way to strike with its heel when the doors to the gym flew open. Bruce took a step closer to Tim instinctively, but realized there was no danger when a riot of neon colour—AKA Dick Grayson in his workout clothes—strode through the doors.

Then Bruce took one look at Dick's rigid smile and ice cold eyes and altered his threat assessment.

"Hey, guys," Dick said, deceptively casual. "What are we doing?"

Bruce heard: *What are* you *doing?*

"Bruce is teaching me some self-defence," Tim said before Bruce could answer.

"Oh?" said Dick. His hard eyes never left Bruce's face. "And why would he be doing that?"

"Uh." In Bruce's peripheral vision, Tim squirmed. He seemed to shrink

even further into his oversized t-shirt. “Because I asked him to.”

Dick blinked, breaking eye contact with Bruce to glance down at Tim with some confusion. Bruce closed his eyes briefly, disappointed to hear another lie come out of the boy’s mouth.

“Tim, why don’t you go get some water?” he suggested. “We’ll pick this up later.”

Tim’s eyes shot from him to Dick and back again before he turned away. He closed both doors tightly behind him when he left.

Bruce waited a few seconds before re-focusing on Dick. There was no point in beating around the bush. “I know what this looks like,” he started, keeping his voice low in case Tim was still within earshot.

It was the opening Dick needed. “So, he wants to learn self-defence. You couldn’t have just signed him up for Taekwondo or something?”

“He lied, Dick. He didn’t ask me to do this,” Bruce said.

Dick’s face changed, and Bruce realized too late that the words were wrong.

“How dare you,” Dick spat in a furious undertone. “After everything that happened— how dare you just *decide* to bring a new Robin into the picture again?”

Bruce’s jaw tightened. “That’s not what I’m doing.”

“It’s been long enough, is that it?” Dick shot back. “Jason’s cold in his grave, so time to start fresh with a new kid?”

“Will you *listen* to me?” Bruce said, loud enough to reverberate in the large room, silencing Dick for the moment. “I am *not* training Tim to be Robin, Dick, I’m just—”

“Just teaching him how to fight,” Dick scoffed, and a thread that Bruce knew was fraying finally snapped.

“Teaching him what to do if he finds himself face-to-face with another fucking shotgun!”

Dick’s jaw dropped, but Bruce whirled away, needing to move, to get out of Dick’s space, to breathe. He forced himself—in through the mouth, out through the nose—as his hands curled in on themselves and released. Breathe, curl, release, breathe. Breathe, curl, release,

breathe.

“You were at the shoe store after,” Bruce went on after he’d done several repetitions of this. “You saw. That man *shot* at *kids,* Dick. And neither of us were there to protect them.”

“I know,” Dick said, his voice suddenly hollow. Bruce took a few more breaths.

“Tim’s been having bad dreams about that night,” he explained, much quieter. “In the dreams, he’s frozen, and his friends get killed right in front of him.”

Dick paled. “Oh,” he breathed. “That’s awful.”

“Yes, it is,” Bruce agreed. “I think he lied to you about why we’re doing this because he’s embarrassed. So, I didn’t tell you anything about his nightmares, understood?”

“Understood,” Dick repeated.

Bruce assessed him for another few seconds, then sighed. “It was actually Alfred’s idea, after the shoe store. But then the party happened... and with the way he’s been acting ever since— I thought maybe this would be a distraction. Something positive that he could focus on right now. And—” Bruce’s voice faltered for a moment before he pushed through— “and with the nightmares, I thought if I could show him something he could do when he felt so helpless, maybe it would do him some good.”

“It did for me,” Dick said, almost too quiet for Bruce to hear.

“Yeah. Me, too.”

The silence stretched, then Dick mumbled, “Sorry.”

“We just got started today,” Bruce explained. “I hadn’t had a chance to tell you yet. I was going to. I didn’t want you to get the wrong idea or jump to conclusions if Tim mentioned it.”

A chagrined smile flickered over Dick’s face. “Yeah. Wouldn’t want that.”

“It’s alright,” Bruce reassured him, a late acceptance of his apology. He looked Dick right in the eye. “Please believe me: I have no intention of bringing Tim into the mission.”

To Bruce's surprise, Dick responded to this with a thoughtful, almost calculating expression that was all Nightwing. It was a look that Bruce recognized, but one that he'd almost never seen directed at him.

"You know, Tim is..." Dick started to say, before trailing off.

"Tim's what?" asked Bruce.

But Dick shook his head, and Nightwing disappeared. "Nothing. He's just a good kid is all."

Bruce knew that wasn't what he was planning to say, but he decided to let it go. "Yeah, he is."

After a moment, Dick shifted his weight, and Bruce knew that meant he was about to move. Sure enough—

"I'm gonna go talk to him," he said, but he paused after just a few steps. "What's the story?" he asked over his shoulder.

Bruce understood at once. Grateful, he answered, "Just a rich guy with a weird hobby and access to way too many personal trainers."

Dick huffed a laugh. "So, the truth. Got it."

Bruce chuckled as well and watched Dick leave the room, both doors hanging open behind him. He waited a few seconds, then breathed out a long sigh that was more than half relief. Arguing with Dick could be as exhausting as going a few rounds with Killer Croc, only it left him with fewer (visible) bruises.

He'd been worried that this would happen— that Dick would think that teaching Tim a little self-defence meant that Bruce was gearing up to take him on as a new Robin. He suspected that Alfred still thought as much, even though Bruce had told him more than once that that wasn't the case. He wasn't in the market for a new partner.

He *wasn't.* He was teaching Tim for Tim's sake, to help him recover from the trauma of being at a store while it was robbed; to prepare him if it ever happened again; and to show him a way to break out of his nightmares at the point where he knew it was a dream but he was helpless to stop it.

That was why Bruce was doing this. There was no ulterior motive. He'd said there would be no more Robins, and he meant it. He *did.*

Alone in the fitness room, though, he thought about it—he let himself think about it—for the first time. Tim was obviously bright, and even just from the hour or so they'd spent training today, Bruce could tell he had potential. He took instruction well, and he didn't hesitate to ask questions when he needed to.

But he was also eager to please, hungry for praise. Frighteningly independent. And there was the lying, the secrets. There was wandering further afield in Metropolis than he was supposed to, and tampering with the manor's security system, and skipping school. There was a nighttime photography hobby he'd mentioned one time in passing, but he'd only ever shown Bruce daytime shots.

I wanted to take pictures of Batman, he'd said the other night, describing what he was doing in the dream when his friends had needed him.

A strange detail. Dreams were strange. It could mean nothing.

But Bruce wondered. Bruce let himself wonder.

The creaking of the back stairs gave the intruder away. Alfred heard him go up, come back down, and go up again.

He waited a second or two before following. He had a good sense of who it was, given how long the intruder had spent rustling around the kitchen, and he was proven right when he saw bright coloured clothing duck around the corner into the public wing.

"Oh dear," he muttered, because he knew where Dick was going.

By the time he caught up, Tim was already coming out, shutting the doors behind him. But he didn't walk away, instead leaning against the wall to the left of the fitness room entrance. It was clear at once what he intended, so Alfred coughed.

The boy whirled and blushed. "I was just—" he said, but Alfred raised his eyebrows, and he stopped.

"Come along now," Alfred said, soft but in a tone that made it clear he would accept no arguments.

Tim followed without a word.

"Can I interest you in a snack?" Alfred asked, when they were several

paces away and at the likely point that Bruce and Dick would start yelling at each other if they were going to. (Alfred held out hope that they wouldn't, but it paid to be practical about this sort of thing.)

"Okay," Tim answered glumly.

"Good lad," Alfred replied. He gestured for Tim to lead the way downstairs.

When they got to the kitchen, Alfred fetched a bag of pre-cut carrots and a dish of homemade hummus while Tim slid onto one of the stools at the breakfast bar. Alfred placed the food in front of him, then turned to pour a glass of milk. To his surprise, when he turned back, Tim hadn't taken a single bite from any of the carrots, and he wasn't looking at his phone, either. He was just sitting there facing the fridge with a thoughtful expression on his face.

"Is something the matter, Master Tim?" Alfred asked finally.

"No, just..." Tim exhaled a short breath. "I think Dick's mad at me."

"I'm almost certain he is not," Alfred replied swiftly. "What would make you think that?"

Tim shrugged. "The way he walked, I guess. He seemed mad."

Alfred considered his next words carefully. "He and Master Bruce don't always see eye-to-eye. I assure you: if he is upset, it is with him, and not with you."

"It's *about* me, though," Tim said under his breath.

"I highly doubt that," Alfred reassured him.

Tim fixed him with an odd look then. His eyes were much older than his face as he took what seemed to be a fortifying breath. Alfred had a sudden and unexpected flash of memory.

"I'm done with the book," Tim said, while Alfred was still reeling. "I left it on my desk, if you want to get it and put it back where it belongs."

It took a moment for Alfred to understand, to remember that Tim had been reading Jason's copy of *Wuthering Heights.* The night he'd made that discovery felt like years ago.

"Yes," he said, clearing his throat like he thought that would settle his

mind. “Yes, of course, Master Tim, I’ll go and— and fetch it right now.”

“While Bruce is busy,” said Tim with a serious nod. “Good thinking.”

Alfred went to the kitchen door, then remembered he was supposed to be keeping Tim from eavesdropping. But the book— he needed to— Which was the priority?

Thankfully, the sound of approaching footsteps made Alfred’s decision for him. He stuck around just long enough to see Dick’s bright leggings coming down the stairs, then he straightened his shoulders and headed out, passing Dick along the way.

Dick was smiling, which seemed like a good sign. His expression was nothing like the look that Alfred had seen in his memory— the look that had been etched so clearly in Alfred’s memory that he would recognize it even on another child’s face. The look of resignation, of determination, of the stubborn drive to put one foot in front of the other despite not knowing what it would bring. Alfred had seen that look the day Dick moved out of the manor, after the explosive argument with Bruce in the Cave. And he’d just seen it again a few minutes ago.

Tim had looked at him like he was saying goodbye.

Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

Dick and Tim have A Conversation.

Tim exhaled through his nose, then finally raised his head. "I need to talk to you," he said. "Can we go somewhere?"

"Yep," Dick answered immediately. The alarm in his head went from a bell tolling in the distance to a steady, rising chime.

Chapter Notes

I am so beyond excited to share this with you today. Please enjoy!

Dick passed Alfred on his way to the kitchen. Alfred seemed distracted and in a hurry, the way he did when there was something in the oven, only he was going the wrong way. Dick thought about stopping him, pulling him back to the kitchen, but then he caught sight of a glum-looking Tim sitting at the breakfast bar with untouched food in front of him, and Dick understood. This was a trade-off.

And, fair enough. Dick made this mess, he should be the one to clean it up.

“Hey,” he greeted Tim as he approached, keeping his tone and posture as friendly and open as possible. “Sorry for barging in on you guys like that.”

Tim shrugged, not meeting his eye. “It’s okay.”

“Not really.” Dick sank onto the stool next to Tim and decided to put it all on the table— or, as much of it as he could. “I was surprised to find out Bruce was teaching you self-defence, but I shouldn’t have reacted like that in front of you.”

“What were you mad about?” Tim said, still looking determinedly at his plate of carrot sticks.

“I wasn’t—” Dick sighed. “It’s complicated.”

Tim nodded at the hummus. “I know.”

Yeah, you do, thought Dick, but he couldn’t say anything directly.

Instead, he asked, “How are you liking it so far?”

Finally, a reaction—the ghost of a smile—but Tim still didn’t look up. “Good,” he said. “Today’s only the first day, but... it’s good. He’s a good teacher.”

Dick hummed, non-committal, and changed the subject. “I came to the manor because I heard you were off school today. I thought we might work on your back handspring some more, if you’re not too tired.”

For some reason, the offer seemed to cause Tim physical pain. He curled in on himself slightly, his face contorting.

“Or not,” Dick amended. He leaned over into Tim’s space a little and placed a hand on his forearm. “Hey, what’s going on? Are you okay?”

Tim exhaled through his nose, then finally raised his head. “I need to talk to you,” he said. “Can we go somewhere?”

“Yep,” Dick answered immediately. The alarm in his head went from a bell tolling in the distance to a steady, rising chime. “Where?”

Tim shook his head. “I don’t care.”

Dick got to his feet and tugged Tim along with him. “Come on.”

“We should put the—” Tim started to say, but Dick was way ahead of him, whisking the plate of carrots and hummus into the fridge. Tim handed him the full glass of milk, and it went right on the shelf next to the food. Dick swivelled, closing the fridge with his foot, and jerked his head towards the garage door.

Tim followed without a word. They put their jackets on in silence and stepped into their shoes. Dick grabbed his car keys just in case and locked up behind them.

“Wannna go for a drive?” he asked as they approached his car— the shittiest in the garage by far.

“Rather walk if that’s okay,” said Tim.

“Yep,” Dick said again. He opened the side exit and gestured for Tim to go ahead.

It was drizzling rain and not exactly warm, but Dick barely felt it. All his attention was on Tim, who finally seemed to be able to take a deep breath once they were outside.

Now what? Dick thought, but Tim pointed towards a path that led to the ravine at the back of the property. He raised his eyebrows, and Dick nodded. Under the canopy of trees, he felt the wind less, and the steady sound of dripping told him it was raining, though he only noticed the occasional droplet hit his face. Ahead of him, Tim walked like he knew where he was going.

Dick kept pace, though he did glance back towards the manor. A shadow at the terrace door was too skinny to be Bruce. Dick raised his hand to wave, and Alfred waved back. Minutes passed, the silence broken only by the crunch of the gravel path under their feet. Little by little, Tim's shoulders crawled down from his ears, but he didn't speak.

What's going on inside that head of yours, Shutterbug? Dick asked him silently.

A squirrel, startled by their presence, came to a dead stop a few paces away. It stared at Dick like it didn't know the answer to his question, either.

Finally, Tim slowed to a stop. He turned on the spot and looked all around them like he thought someone was about to jump out of the trees.

"I think this is far enough," he said.

"Far enough for what?" Dick made himself smile. "You're not leading me out here to kill me, are you?"

"As if I could," Tim muttered, so quiet Dick barely heard him. "Bruce's back-up security system got me last time, so I can't cross the property line, but—"

Dick's attempt at humour fell away at once. "Tim, are you running away again?"

"No," Tim answered. "No, I just want to make sure."

"What are you talking about? Make sure of what?"

For the first time since Dick came into the kitchen, Tim looked him in the eye. It was the exact same look he'd given Nightwing on the roof. No fear, no concern, no hiding. Dick's heart started to beat a little faster, though he kept his face completely neutral.

“Can you check?” Tim asked flatly.

Dick felt an unwelcome chill run down his spine. “Can I check what, Tim?”

Tim’s eyes scanned the trees around them again. When he re-focused on Dick, he seemed tired more than anything. “I’m going to look away for two minutes,” he said.

He turned his back. Dick frowned at Tim’s jacket for a second until he caught on: Tim suspected that Bruce had more than just the perimeter sensors that he’d accidentally tripped the night he snuck out. Today, he was asking without asking whether or not they were under surveillance.

Which meant... *okay.* Dick took a deep breath.

He kept one eye on Tim’s back as he pulled out his phone and unlocked the secret profile. A few taps let him pull up the Batcave’s map of the grounds. His phone appeared as a blue dot on the trail. Thankfully, Bruce’s grey dot was still inside the manor.

He filtered for surveillance cameras and found one about twenty metres north— no audio, just infrared. After that, there wasn’t another one until they got closer to the property line. There was a narrow bike trail that branched off to the east past the north camera. He zoomed in until he found it, and smiled when he saw there were no cameras on it.

“This way,” Dick said, locking his phone again and sliding it into his jacket pocket.

Tim breathed out like he’d been holding his breath before following. Dick kept an easy smile on his lips as they passed the infrared camera to the north, then pointed ahead to the narrow branching path. On the off chance that Bruce was watching them live, hopefully he’d assume Dick was showing Tim where he used to ride his bike and nothing more.

A few steps into the bike trail, they were hidden from the view of the closest camera, but Dick led Tim more than thirty metres in, just in case, before stopping.

“We’re off the grid,” he announced. “Nobody can see or hear us here.”

“Good,” said Tim, but then he didn’t say anything else.

Dick stayed silent, too, watching Tim pace. He had a sense of what was about to happen, but if Tim wanted to do this, he had to be the one to say it. Maybe Tim wanted to talk to him about something else; until Tim came right out and said it, Dick wasn't volunteering anything.

"Promise not to freak out," Tim said finally.

"Okay," said Dick, huffing a faint laugh. "But promise *me* you'll take your own advice."

Tim scowled, but it disappeared a second later. "Fine," he said, closing his eyes. "Okay, I'm just gonna say it."

Say it, Dick echoed silently.

Tim screwed up his face like he thought Dick was going to hit him. "I know that you're Nightwing."

Dick took a breath and let it out slowly. "Okay," he said.

Tim cracked open one eye, then the other. "Okay?"

Dick nodded. "Okay."

Tim stared, but at least he no longer looked like he thought Dick would punch him. "That's it?"

"That's it," Dick repeated with a shrug.

Tim assessed him a second longer, then his eyes narrowed. "You already knew that I knew."

Dick finally let himself smile. "I already knew that you knew."

"How?" Tim asked— no, *demanded.* "How did you figure it out?"

Dick laughed. "How did *I* figure it out? How did *you* figure it out?"

"I asked you first," Tim said, sullen. In the time that Dick had known him, he'd never sounded more like a little brother.

"Fair enough," said Dick, chuckling again. "Tim, you told me," he said more seriously, and not unkindly. "Remember when you showed me the picture you took of that guy in the park in Metropolis— the one who'd broken out of Blackgate? Once I knew you were the shutterbug, it wasn't hard to figure out why you would have trusted *me* with that

intel."

Tim's eyes narrowed again, but he wasn't mad this time. He was clearly thinking this over. "And you knew I was the shutterbug because of that cop, right?"

Smart cookie, Dick thought again fondly. "Actually, no."

Tim tilted his head. "So you lied to me."

"Look who's talking," said Dick with a crooked grin. Tim blushed. "It was the envelopes," Dick explained. "You gave both me and Jim Gordon pictures in the same envelopes."

Tim's eyes were wide. "How did *you* get the pictures from Gordon?"

"Luck," said Dick. "Batman couldn't meet Gordon one night, so he asked me to go instead. I took the pictures and the envelopes home to run some tests and noticed they were same as the one you'd given me from your darkroom."

"Huh," said Tim.

"But I couldn't tell you I knew who you were without admitting who I was," Dick went on. "So I made up that story about the cop and the traffic cam."

"So the cops don't know," Tim concluded.

"The cops don't know," Dick repeated. He watched this news sink in, then said, "Your turn. How did you figure out who I am?"

Tim shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Oh. I've known for a long time."

"How long are we talking?" Dick asked. When Tim shrugged, he prompted, "Obviously you knew in July, because you told me about that criminal in Metropolis. Did you figure it out right before then, or...?"

"Uhhhhh," said Tim.

"Tim," Dick prodded when he didn't answer. "I promised not to freak out, remember? Just tell me. How long have you known?"

"Okay." Tim raised his head and looked directly into the space over Dick's left shoulder. "I've known for about six years. Give or take."

Dick blinked, taken aback. He'd expected a handful of months. He'd expected to find out that Bruce had messed up early in Tim's stay and revealed something he wasn't supposed to. But—

"Years?" he repeated. "Si— six *years?"*

Tim nodded at a tree behind Dick. "Uh huh. I was... I was nine when I — um..."

Dick's head was spinning. "But— but six years ago, I was—"

"Still Robin, yeah," Tim added to the sky.

All Dick could think to say was, "How?"

A small smile flickered over Tim's face. "The circus," he said. "It's one of my earliest memories. One of the best. I remember you did a quadruple somersault, and I remember the ringmaster said that there were only a few people in the world who could do that, and—"

"—and three of them are under the big top tonight," Dick recited from memory.

Tim nodded. "So, when I saw Robin do one later..." He shrugged. "I figured, what were the odds it was somebody else?"

"I see," said Dick. The spinning was slowing down now, but Tim kept explaining.

"From there, it wasn't hard to put the rest of it together. Everybody knew that the last Flying Grayson had been taken in by Bruce Wayne. And after you moved away, and a mysterious new acrobatic vigilante appeared in Blüdhaven, well...."

"Seems pretty obvious when you put it like that," Dick had to admit.

"Not really," Tim said. It felt like he was throwing Dick a bone. "Not many people would recognize a quadruple somersault. I just remembered because—" His voice faltered a little when Dick looked at him, but he pressed on. "Because you signed my program that night, and you said you were gonna do one just for me."

Dick's eyes were stinging suddenly. He'd forgotten that he used to say things like that. They all did, whenever a kid came up for an autograph.

But it's not true, he'd protested to his father one time. *We were gonna*

do it anyway! It's not nice to lie to people like that.

We're not lying, Robin Red-Breast, his father had answered. *We are performers. When we perform, it is* always *for them.*

"So yeah," Tim said, breaking Dick out of his memories. "I figured out you were Robin—now Nightwing—and Bruce is Batman. Jason was obviously the second Robin, before he... well."

Dick swallowed hard and nodded.

"I know that's why you were mad at me earlier, in the fitness room," Tim added quietly.

"What?" said Dick, surprised, but Tim went on like he didn't notice.

"It's like Jason's book," he said, which Dick didn't understand. "There's things that are off-limits. Things that he used to do— that Bruce used to do with him, and I— I'm not— so. I get it."

"No," Dick finally managed to say, stepping forward to put his hands on Tim's shoulders. "No, Tim, that's not what happened. I wasn't upset because you were doing something that Jason used to do. I'm sorry. I..."

Tim's eyes landed on his. Dick started over.

"I overheard Bruce teaching you how to do a palm-heel strike on a nerve cluster, and it— it set me off. I assumed that— I thought maybe he offered you Robin, and I— I kinda lost it."

"Understandable," said Tim with a wry smile. "I'm not exactly Robin material."

Dick shook his head, because Tim didn't understand at all. "No, Tim, this has nothing to do with whether or not you're qualified. In fact, you're—"

Dick stopped himself there. "That's not the point," he redirected. "The point is, we agreed, after Jason, that he would talk to me before making any kind of Robin decisions. When I overheard you guys, I thought he'd gone behind my back again, and it— it upset me."

"Again?" Tim repeated, and his eyes went wide. "Oh. So, you didn't know...?"

"It's a long story," Dick sighed. "And one that I don't like to tell if I

can help it. But what I'm getting at is that what happened earlier had nothing to do with you."

"Okay," Tim nodded, and he looked relieved. Honestly, Dick was relieved, too. He moved on to a lighter subject.

"So, Bruce didn't screw up and let something slip in the time since you've lived here," he said. "I assumed that was how you found out."

"No," Tim affirmed, with half a laugh. "No screw-ups."

"Good. Well, thank you," Dick said, slightly awkward and unsure how to end the conversation.

"For...?"

"For keeping our secret for this long."

"Dick, I will never tell anyone," Tim promised him seriously. "The only reason I'm letting you know now is because I have information on a case, and I couldn't see any other way of getting it to you."

Dick knew he had good reflexes, but still, it took him a second to switch gears. Every time he thought he'd found solid ground, Tim pulled the rug out from under him. The kid was full of surprises, apparently.

"Okay," he said, leaning against a nearby tree. "Hit me. What have you got, Bug?"

Tim's eyes widened. Now he was the one on his back foot. Dick tried not to look smug.

"Well, Nightwing," he said after a pause, like it had taken him a second to get up the courage to say the name out loud, "I have some new information about the LexCorp case."

"The LexCorp— you mean the dead scientists? The case we talked about on the roof?" At Tim's nod, he added, "How did you even find out the details about that?"

Tim's smile was small, almost coy. "Okay, so maybe Batman screwed up a little," he said, and he told Dick about how Bruce presented certain case details to Tim in conversation as if they came from a TV show.

Dick just shook his head and gestured for Tim to go on. He did,

revealing Dick's own screw-up in letting one of the victims' names slip during their conversation on the rooftop (whoops), and explaining where his research had led him from there. Dick, surprised (but not *that* surprised), had no real choice but to confirm what Tim had found on his own: namely, the identities of the victims and their apparent manner of death.

"Okay, so what's your new intel?" he asked finally. "And how did you get it?"

Tim seemed to steel himself with a deep breath. "I can't tell you how I know this, or where I got it. So please don't ask, okay?"

Can't or won't? Dick heard Batman say on that rooftop back in July. Dick had protected Tim then, and Nightwing had been protecting Bug since he'd uncovered his identity weeks ago. He wasn't going to compromise that trust now.

"I won't ask," he promised. Tim assessed him closely, like he was judging whether or not Dick was telling the truth. Then he nodded.

"Okay. So, first of all, everybody who died? They were all on the same team at LexCorp."

Dick frowned. "Yeah? We knew that already."

Tim pressed his hands together and twisted his fingers. "No, I mean they were all still *actively* on the same team, working on the same project, right up until they died."

"No... I don't think so," Dick said slowly. "The records I have all say that they left LexCorp. One of them was doing a placement, which ended, another one got a new job. And the oldest victim, Siemens, he retired almost six months before. Only the last victim, Dr. Rota, was still working at LexCorp at the time."

Tim was already shaking his head. "I don't think that's true. From what I heard, they were all still working in Dr. Rota's lab, on the same project, at the time of their death."

Dick considered this. He hadn't verified Bruce's information about what each of the victims had been doing for work just prior to their deaths, but he hadn't thought he'd had to. He'd assumed Bruce's source for that was rock solid.

"Okay," he said, nodding. "I'll do some digging and see what I can

find out."

"The project they were working on was something called the generator," Tim went on. "Does that name mean anything to you?"

"Yeah," said Dick. "The name's come up a few times in the case file, but I don't know what it is."

"Me neither," said Tim. "But whatever it does, I think it's the reason the team is dead."

"We suspect that, too," said Dick, "but it's been hard to pin down a motive. The murders would make sense if someone was trying to intimidate Rota, but if the generator was what they wanted, and she was the person with the best chance of getting it for them, it makes no sense that they would kill her, too."

"That's the thing, though," said Tim slowly. "I don't think Rota's team was actually murdered."

Dick pushed himself off the tree he'd been leaning against. "What are you talking about? Of course they were murdered."

Tim shook his head again. "I don't think so. My... *source* tells me that there was an accident of some kind while they were working on the generator project, and that was how they died."

Dick stared. Tim stared back.

Finally, Dick said, "Tim, that makes no sense."

"I know."

"They died weeks apart."

"I know."

"None of them died the same way. None of them died in the same place."

"I know."

"So...?"

"I know." Tim blew out a breath. "I can't wrap my head around it either."

“Your source,” said Dick, and he regretted his tone when he saw Tim tense up. “I’m not gonna ask you who they are. Just… are you sure they were telling you the truth?”

A long silence followed the question. “They weren’t talking to me,” Tim admitted finally. “But the people they were talking to— well. It’s possible my source was lying to them. But…”

“But you don’t think they were,” Dick concluded. He sighed. “And I don’t suppose you can tell me why you think that?”

“I… can’t,” Tim said softly. The admission seemed to cause him real pain. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Dick told him, and he reached out, carefully telegraphing his intentions. A moment later, Tim was under his arm. Tim leaned into the touch, and Dick held on because it seemed like he needed it. “I’m still not sure I trust your source, but I trust you.”

Tim eased out from under his arm and looked at Dick with huge, hopeful eyes. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Dick reassured him. “Bug’s always had good information before. No reason to think this time would be any different.”

Tim ducked his head, but not before Dick got a glimpse of his smile.

“I’ll look into this,” Dick went on. “Maybe I can find something that’ll independently verify what your source said.”

“Like what?” asked Tim.

“I don’t know,” Dick admitted, before thinking about it for a moment. “The employment records could have been falsified, I guess.”

Tim seemed unconvinced. “Don’t you think Batman would have noticed if it was a forgery?”

“Depends on how good the forgery was,” Dick said, gaining momentum as he considered the possibilities. “Maybe there *was* an accident, and LexCorp wanted to cover it up. So they hired the Falcones to silence everyone who knew about it, then they forged the records to make it seem like the scientists weren’t still working there when they mysteriously died.”

“Maybe,” Tim admitted. “But if the records are fake, how are you

gonna find the real ones?"

Dick tilted his head. "I can think of a few ways. Some riskier than others. None of them legal."

"Like breaking into their office?"

"Probably not physically," Dick conceded. "Digitally, though... that could work."

"I tried that," said Tim, "but LexCorp has firewalls like you wouldn't believe. I have no idea how you're gonna get in."

Dick let a slow smile spread across his face. "Oh, *I'm* not going to," he said, then another idea occurred to him. "Hey, how do you feel about coming back to Blüdhaven with me for the rest of the weekend?"

Tim blinked in surprise. "Um— what? Why?"

"There's somebody I think you should meet."

"In Blüdhaven?"

"No, she actually lives here, but we'll have a lot more independence if we get out of Gotham for a couple days."

Tim looked doubtful. "Bruce probably won't let me."

"Yes, he will," Dick assured him.

"How do you know?"

"Trust me," said Dick.

"I do," Tim said, and it was like when Dick attached the harness to take him to the roof. Like trusting Dick was easy. Like he knew he'd be in good hands. "But Bruce hasn't seemed willing to let me out of his sight lately."

Dick nodded sympathetically. "He does that. But I'll work it out with him, don't worry." Then a new thought occurred to him. "Unless you don't want to go?"

"No, I do," Tim insisted. "It sounds fun."

"Great," said Dick with a smile. He gestured towards the main path, where Bruce's cameras were waiting for them. "Okay. Ready to head

back?”

Tim nodded and fell into step beside him. After about a dozen paces, however, Dick found himself slowing down again. He was thinking about going to Blüdhaven this weekend, introducing Tim to Babs, working the LexCorp case with him. He thought about Tim running around Gotham at night, taking pictures of criminal activity and finding a way to get that information to Batman and the GCPD. He thought about Tim (somehow) striking out on his own to collect new intel about the LexCorp case from an anonymous source, and the leap of faith he took today in revealing himself to Dick. He thought about the circus, about the autograph, about the trust that Tim so readily placed in Nightwing.

Dick stopped walking, still a dozen metres short of where Bruce’s cameras would catch him. A few paces on, Tim stopped as well and turned back. He had a look of innocent curiosity on his face that took Dick by surprise. Tim knew so much— had it really never occurred to him?

“What is it?” Tim asked.

“Robin material,” Dick said, and Tim’s look of confusion intensified. “You really think you’re not?”

“I— well, yeah,” Tim sputtered. “I’m not.”

“Tim, you’re literally helping me and Batman solve a mystery right now,” Dick pointed out. “What do you think Robins do?”

“Well— I can’t—” Tim made a frustrated noise. “I can’t do somersaults. Or kick really high. I don’t think I’ve ever thrown a real punch. I’m not....”

“Not what?” Dick prompted, when he didn’t finish.

Tim sighed towards the ground. “I’m not you,” he said. “And I’m not Jason, either.”

Dick smiled, but it was tinged with sadness. “You don’t have to be exactly like us to be Robin.”

“Yes, I do,” Tim argued, with surprising emphasis. “If Batman needs a Robin, then it needs to be a good Robin. A *real* Robin. I’m not— I’m just me.”

Dick stared at him for a moment, then let out a long breath. “Okay,” he said, because he clearly wasn’t going to win this one today. He slung an arm around Tim’s shoulders as they started walking again. “Maybe Batman needs a Robin, maybe he doesn’t. But Nightwing could sure use a Bug.”

“Okay, whatever.” Tim huffed an embarrassed laugh and tried to squirm out of Dick’s grasp, but Dick didn’t let him get far.

“Come on,” he said as they emerged from the bike trail. “Look alive, there’s a Bat-camera around the next corner.”

Tim stopped squirming and looked around like he was searching for it. “Is that just a regular camera?”

“Nope, totally different,” said Dick.

“Thermal?” Tim guessed. “Ultraviolet?”

“Nope,” Dick said again, then he shrugged. “Or, maybe. I don’t know. But it’s Batman’s camera, so—”

“So it’s a Bat-camera.”

Dick grinned. “Now you’re catching on.”

Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

Summary:

Nightwing, Oracle, and Shutterbug work the case.

“Hi,” said the boy, with an awkward half-wave toward the camera. “You can call me Bug for short.”

Barbara opened Batman’s Shutterbug file on her second screen and skimmed it quickly. This *was the person who’d been sending Batman and her father intel? When did he get started, kindergarten?*

Barbara watched the rain wash over her windows. Outside, the tops of skyscrapers vanished into the misty sky. She shivered and sipped her tea; the damp had snuck in despite her best efforts. Soon, she decided, she’d close the blinds again and go back to artificial light; this view was depressing.

In her ear, Dick was still talking, giving her an exceptionally detailed overview of the LexCorp case— the same LexCorp case that Bruce had given her an exceptionally detailed overview of about 36 hours ago. She could have cut Dick off at any time, of course, but she was half-afraid to try and speak, in case she started laughing.

“So yeah, I’ll take anything you can find on the team that was working on the generator project,” Dick—technically Nightwing—concluded finally. “Specifically employment records.”

Well, at least that was slightly different from Batman’s request for details on the project. “You don’t want information on the generator itself?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess. Kind of,” he said, which meant *no*. “But the angle I’m working revolves around the people who built it.”

“And why they’ve ended up dead,” Barbara finished.

“Exactly,” Dick agreed. “According to the records we had accessed before, all but one of them had quit working at LexCorp prior to their death for one reason or another. But I’m not so sure, now, that that information is accurate.”

Interesting. "Why not?"

"Mm, call it a hunch?"

Very interesting. "You're not usually one to chase hunches."

Dick sighed, the phone speaker crackling. "Okay, it's not a hunch. It's unverified information from an unknown source."

"Very, *very* interesting," Barbara accidentally said out loud. "Does Bruce know?"

"No," Dick answered immediately. "And you *cannot* tell him."

Barbara rolled her eyes, grateful that they weren't on a video call. "You guys really need to sort your shit out."

"I know," Dick said, to his credit. "But for once this has nothing to do with our shit. This is something else. I just don't want to bring it to him until I'm sure of what it is."

"Fair enough," Barbara conceded. "Do I get to know?"

"Yeah, actually," he said, surprising her again. "But I'll tell you later. Think we can get this going tonight?"

"You're lucky," she told him. "Normally for a hack like this, I'd need at least a day to formulate a game plan. But I already got one started yesterday, so yeah, we're good to launch tonight."

Dick's short, surprised pause was a glorious bit of payback for the monologue he'd subjected her to a moment ago.

"On Wednesday night— well, Thursday morning, technically, Batman contacted me and asked if I could hack into LexCorp's servers to find information on the generator," she explained.

"He did?"

"He did. Apparently, there's chatter on the streets about a new device coming into Gotham from Metropolis that's going to put the Falcones on top of the drug trade. He suspects it's the LexCorp generator. He asked me to get him the project specs, so he knows what he's dealing with."

"Huh," said Dick. "I hadn't heard about that."

“See above re: getting your shit sorted out,” Barbara reminded him.

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Anyway.” Barbara pushed her glasses up. “To answer your question, yes, I can get into LexCorp and get information on the project team, since I’m gonna be in there getting information on the project itself anyway. And yes, we can start that process tonight.”

“You’re the best,” Dick told her.

“Uh huh.”

“I’ll call you on video. After dinner, say, around 8?”

“Sure, sounds good,” Barbara confirmed.

“Great,” said Dick. “Oh, and just FYI, there’s someone else I’m bringing in. I think you two will get along.”

“Wait, what?” said Barbara, but Dick was already saying goodbye and hanging up.

Barbara pulled her phone away from her ear and glared at it. *Figures,* she thought. A few minutes ago, he wouldn’t let her get a word in edgewise, but when she actually needed him to talk, he clammed up.

“You owe me, Grayson,” she said to the phone, to the empty clocktower, to the rain.

At 8:05, the call rang on Barbara’s computer. She dragged the comms window onto her main screen and maximized it before answering. Given what Dick had said about bringing another person into the call, she left her video off, but this clearly wasn’t an issue for him. His camera was on, and he was wearing no mask.

He beamed at the screen when the call connected, and Barbara felt the old familiar butterflies rise up towards her ribcage. She wished those butterflies would learn to take a hint; it’d been almost a year since she and Dick broke up, and their time apart had shown that that had been the right call. Still, spending time with him felt familiar and safe, and he still made her happy, even if it wasn’t romantic anymore.

“Hey, Oracle,” he greeted her.

“Hi,” she replied simply, because they hadn’t discussed what she was

supposed to call him in the presence of the mysterious 'someone else' who was apparently now involved in the LexCorp case.

She didn't have long to wait on that front, because Dick tugged what was clearly a teenaged boy into frame just a few seconds later. He was wearing a ratty grey sweater with its hood up and a black domino mask that Barbara recognized as one of Dick's old ones.

"Oracle, meet Shutterbug," Dick said with a flourish. "Shutterbug, Oracle. He already knows who I am, but we're keeping his real identity a secret for now."

"Hi," said the boy, with an awkward half-wave toward the camera. "You can call me Bug for short."

Barbara was grateful again that she'd left the camera off, so she didn't have to hide her expression of surprise. She opened Batman's Shutterbug file on her second screen and skimmed it quickly. *This* was the person who'd been sending Batman and her father intel? When did he get started, kindergarten?

"Your reputation precedes you, Bug," she commented, her eyes flying over the file.

"Um, thanks?" said Bug.

"I was especially impressed by the way you took control of Commissioner Gordon's computer to send him pictures of the Maroni hit on a Falcone runner."

"You know about that?"

"She's Oracle, she knows everything," Dick interjected. Barbara couldn't keep back a smile.

"Nightwing didn't tell me you were the one he was bringing in," she went on.

"Actually, Bug's been involved for a while now, working the case independently," Dick corrected her. "But recently we joined forces."

"I take it the 'unverified information from an unknown source' came to you courtesy of our new friend here?"

"It did," Dick confirmed.

"And you guys need me to get into the LexCorp servers to see if you

can verify it."

"Yes, please," said Dick.

He proceeded to explain—helped at certain points by Bug—that an anonymous source had revealed to Bug the possibility that 1) the targeted scientists could have in fact still been employed and active at LexCorp when they were killed, and 2) there was an accident involving the generator project that could have contributed somehow to their deaths.

"But that—" Barbara started.

"I know," Dick cut her off. The look in his eyes told her he was skeptical, too. "That's why we're digging into it."

"Hm," said Barbara, trying not to sound judgemental. She wasn't sure it worked. "Well, let it never be said that you bring me boring work, Nightwing."

"You know I love keeping you on your toes, Oracle," Dick parried back, and, dammit, there were those butterflies again.

Stop it, she told them firmly. "Alright," she said out loud. "So, personnel files. You know Batman already got this information, right?"

"Yeah." Dick's eyes slid over to Bug. "We think maybe the records he accessed were forged somehow."

Barbara's eyebrows shot up. She navigated over to the Batcomputer quickly and snagged the complete case file, which included Bruce's primary sources. She found the records in question, then pulled them up and shared her screen with Dick.

"Let's take a look, shall we?" she said.

"What are we looking for?" asked Bug.

"Footprints under the snow," she replied. "Right, Nightwing?"

The corners of Dick's mouth turned up slightly. "You know I've never been as good at spotting them as you are."

"Well, if you had the patience to keep practising—"

"Why would I have to practise when you'll always be here to do it for

me?"

"Keep dreaming, Boy Wonder."

"What is happening," Bug broke into their *repartée.*

"When you get good enough at this kind of stuff, you can see the traces of people who've been in the files before you," Barbara explained, taking pity on the kid. "I call it footprints under the snow. It's like faint outlines— you have to really look for them sometimes, but once you know what you're doing, you can find them."

"Can you teach me?" Bug asked, his eyes huge behind the mask.

"Absolutely," said Barbara, surprised but pleased. She walked him through the basics—teasing Dick the whole time—and marvelled at how quickly Bug picked it up. He even predicted the next steps before she got there.

"Where did you find this kid, Nightwing?" Barbara asked.

"He found us, remember?" Dick replied fondly, reaching over to mess up Bug's hood. In doing so, he revealed some of the kid's black hair. It seemed kind of long and a bit shaggy— similar to Dick's actually. Barbara wondered if that was intentional.

"Quit it," Bug said, pulling away and righting the hood. His cheeks were pink under the mask but he was smiling, too. Dick huffed a laugh and returned his attention to the screen.

"So what are the footprints telling you?" he asked. "Since you know I can't see them."

"Well, you were right: the files have been tampered with," Barbara told him. "It's subtle, but you can see it here—" she highlighted a section— "and here."

Another highlight appeared suddenly. "Is this anything?" asked Bug.

"Gold star, Shutterbug," said Barbara. "The footprints are all over this, assuming you know where to look."

"So, what do we do now?" Dick asked.

"Now?" said Barbara, closing the forgery. "Now, we break in and steal the real records."

All Tim could think as he watched Oracle work was, *Wow. Wow, wow, wow.*

He thought he was pretty good with a computer— especially considering he was more or less self-taught. But watching Oracle's code fly across her shared screen was something else entirely. He had so many questions, it was hard to keep his mouth shut and let her focus.

Beside him, Dick was watching closely, too, with an intensity behind his eyes that Tim had rarely seen except through the lens of his camera. Nightwing was on the case.

(Nightwing had *listened* to him. He'd respected the anonymity of Bug's so-called source, and he hadn't told Batman anything, and he'd already known that Tim knew who he was but he didn't get mad, and instead he invited Bug to work the case with him, and introduced him to another member of the Bat team, and now *Tim* was wearing a mask, and wow. *Wow, wow, wow.)*

It almost made Tim wish that he hadn't gone through with the meeting with Mr. Rockwell on Wednesday. He almost wished he was sticking around Wayne Manor. Maybe this could have become the new normal— spending weekends with Dick in Blüdhaven, working cases with Nightwing behind Batman's back.

Maybe it could still happen, which would be *awesome*... but would Dick want anything to do with him after the emancipation? Tim was banking on Bruce's ignorance of Bug's true identity to hope that, once all was said and done, he'd be able to keep sending tips to him and Gordon, but Dick already knew everything. He'd protected Tim so far, but what were the odds that he would keep doing it after Tim made it clear that he didn't want to live in Bruce's house anymore? At some point, Dick's loyalty to Bruce had to win out, even if they didn't always see eye-to-eye, as Alfred put it.

Then again, Tim reasoned, if Bruce and Dick got closer as a result of his exit... well, at least something good would come out of it in the long run.

"Okay, we're in," Oracle announced, breaking Tim out of his thoughts. "Downloading complete personnel records for the deceased scientists."

"Beautiful," said Dick.

"Here you go," she said a moment later, and a download window

appeared on Dick's second screen. Tim had no idea how she'd done that. "Moving onto the project files now."

"'Kay." Dick muted the mic. "You wanna start reviewing the personnel records?" he asked Tim.

"Hell yes," Tim answered at once, and Dick sent him a quick grin before re-activating the mic.

Tim adjusted his mask—it was *itchy,* he had no idea how Dick did this every night—and began scrolling through the records. He started with the first person who'd died: Blake Hiss. They'd been found in the Gotham marina back in February. According to Batman's case file (Nightwing showed him Batman's case file!!), Hiss had left LexCorp the previous October. But according to the record in front of Tim right now, Hiss' employment status was changed from 'active' to 'inactive' on February 1st, just one day after their last confirmed sighting at a bar on Gotham's waterfront. Even more strangely, during the month of January, Hiss logged ten sick days and five days of unpaid leave. Tim did some quick math and discovered that that was fifteen out of twenty working days missed that month, which seemed like a lot.

Tiffany Close's record revealed a similar pattern. Batman's information stated that her placement ended at LexCorp at the end of August, but according to what Tim was reading right now, her status was only changed on February 25th. Her body had been found the following day in a dead end alley in Gotham City. Like Hiss, she'd missed most of the last month of her employment, taking intermittent sick days starting on January 15th, then missing most of February 10th to 25th.

Tim almost didn't need to look at Anthony Siemens' records to guess that it would be the same. Batman had noted that he took an early retirement effective at the end of November; LexCorp's records showed the change in his status on April 22nd. Just after midnight on the 23rd, Siemens' yacht was found on fire in the Gotham marina, and his body was discovered below decks, apparently dead from carbon monoxide poisoning.

Must have been a long exposure, Tim thought grimly, noting how Siemens' absences started in early March. He missed fewer work days than the others, and not more than two in sequence, but still. By the time his employment status was changed, he'd used all ten of his paid sick days and taken a handful of unpaid days as well.

Finally, Tim got to Dr. Rota's records. Unlike the others, there seemed

to have been no deception on the end of her employment. Batman's file showed her employed right up until her death on May 10th, and the LexCorp records matched. Like her team, however, she took several sick days in the lead-up to her disappearance from the Kane Bridge in the middle of the night.

Tim waved to get Dick's attention. "Do we have medical records for the victims?" he asked, once Dick had muted the mic and spun in Tim's direction.

"Yeah, somewhere," said Dick. He picked up the black tablet that held Batman's case file and began swiping through it. "Why?"

Tim explained the pattern of multiple sick days and absences from work. He pointed to the places on the screen where this information was displayed, but Dick barely glanced up, apparently trusting Tim to have read and interpreted the records correctly. It was a small thing, but it made Tim's chest go warm with pride.

"Here you go," he said, passing Tim the tablet. "See if it lines up."

"Thanks," said Tim. He began comparing the documents while Oracle finished downloading project specs and sent them to Dick as well.

"Okay, last but not least, the accounting side of things," she said. "Let's see who they're making the generator for."

Tim's hand shook slightly as he swiped through Anthony Siemens' medical record. He snuck a glance over at the middle monitor, at Dick, but thankfully Dick didn't notice.

"I've compiled a list of companies that are known to be associated with the Falcones," he said.

"I see it," Oracle replied. Her code flashed across the screen too fast for Tim to follow. "Hm. Nope," she said a moment later. "None of those companies match the client listed here."

"Damn," Dick sighed.

"You should know by now it's never that easy," Oracle said, a teasing note in her voice that was by now familiar.

(And kind of gross. Tim didn't know he was signing up to listen to Nightwing and Oracle flirt with each other all night.)

“Who *is* the client?” Dick asked. Tim held his breath.

“A firm called Dunbar Holdings,” Oracle answered. Tim started breathing again.

“Never heard of them,” said Dick.

“I can do some research later, if you want.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“No problem. But while I’m in here…” More code, more typing— fast, she was *so* fast. “There. I’m exporting the client database from their CRM. It’s a big list, but hopefully we can find something worthwhile.”

“Great,” said Dick, and Tim nodded to himself. He’d have to get his hands on that list, to find out to what extent Drake Industries was on it.

In the meantime, though, he turned back to the Bat-tablet. He started by cross-referencing the first date of each employee’s absence with their medical history. He soon discovered another pattern.

“Okay, I think we’re about done here,” Oracle was saying when Tim realized what he’d found. “I’m going to start pulling out—”

“Wait,” Tim exclaimed.

Dick turned his head, startled. “What? What is it?”

Tim held up a finger and finished checking Dr. Rota’s medical history, just to be sure. He nodded when he saw it again. “Oracle, LexCorp has an on-site medical clinic for staff and their families. Any chance you can get your hands on patient records for our victims?”

Oracle breathed out— it was audible. “I can try,” she said, and she started typing again.

“What are you looking for, Bug?” Dick asked.

“All four of the victims have notes from their family physicians, saying that they’d visited the workplace clinic on the same day,” Tim explained, “January 5th. And when each employee started calling in sick, they got notes from their doctors expedited because their doctors were coordinating with the doctors at the LexCorp clinic. Nothing here says what their visits to the LexCorp clinic were about, though, or what they were sick with.”

“Let me see.” Dick held out a hand for the Bat-tablet. His eyes hopped from the text on the screen to the personnel records. “You’re right. Oracle, anything?”

“Medical files are a whole new level of encryption,” she said, sounding distracted. “Give me a minute.”

Dick muted the mic again and turned to Tim. “Good eye,” he said. “I’m not sure I would have noticed that.”

“Yes, you would have,” Tim protested immediately. Nightwing was a *detective,* after all. Tim was just Tim.

“Alright, yeah, I would have,” Dick conceded, “but probably not right away. I would have had to get Oracle to make another run on LexCorp in a few days when I spotted the pattern.” He smiled and squeezed Tim’s shoulder. “Good work, Bug.”

Tim was warm all over, and he was definitely grinning like an idiot, but he didn’t care. “Thanks, Nightwing.”

“Oh, boy,” Barbara muttered to herself when she caught sight of the LexCorp medical clinic’s file protections.

She paused for a sip of her diet cola and looked away from the screen for a full twenty seconds. She needed the caffeine, and her eyes were going to appreciate the break.

Outside, thunder rumbled. She had a feeling she could be at this all night, if things didn’t go her way. She took a deep breath, rolled her neck a few times, and put her hands back on the keyboard.

She’d just have to *make sure* things went her way.

It was almost an hour before Babs came back. “Got it,” she said, dropping another file window on Dick’s monitor. “But I’m pulling out now. I’ve been here way too long.”

“Yeah, do it,” said Dick, before muting the mic once more. He opened the new files on the second monitor, then swiped up on the Bat-tablet with two fingers, dropping Bruce’s files onto the centre monitor, so they could do a side-by-side comparison.

“Whoa, you can do that?” said Tim, and Dick glanced over to see him staring, his eyes wide behind the old mask. Dick suppressed a grin—it

never got old, watching Tim geek out over this stuff—and nodded.

“I have learned that through Bat-tech, all things are possible,” he said with the air of wise old monk.

“Huh,” said Tim. “Is it because you’re synched remotely to the Batcomputer?”

The kid was a quick study, and Dick loved it. “Basically, yeah,” he replied. “I can’t do everything here that I could do in the Cave, but it comes pretty close.”

“That’s *so* cool.”

“It is,” Dick agreed, then he re-directed his attention to the monitors. “Okay, let’s see what we’re looking at.”

“Yeah.” Tim squinted at the records, comparing them left to right. “The dates do seem to match, for the most part.”

“They do,” said Dick. “Hiss and Close are identical— they saw somebody at the LexCorp clinic, got them to coordinate with their family doctor to get a note justifying their sick leave, and that was that.”

“But Siemens and Rota, not so much,” Tim continued. “See here? Siemens saw the LexCorp doc on January 5th, same as the others, and he got medical leave starting in March, but look at the visit to his own doctor in February.”

Dick nodded. Siemens’ doctor’s notes left much to be desired, but they indicated that Siemens was dealing with a respiratory infection. Not uncommon, especially during the winter, but the last part of the notes set off alarm bells in Dick’s head.

Patient claims severity of symptoms is due to chemical exposure during an incident at work last month, treated by on-site medical personnel. Test results indicate no contaminants or particulates in lungs, no lasting injuries consistent with chemical exposure. Follow up call with LexCorp staff clinicians: the incident in question resulted in no exposure to harmful chemicals.

“And look how many times Rota went to the doctor between March 3rd and the day she disappeared in May,” Tim added, pointing. “She was there almost every week.”

“Blood test, urine test, patch test, lung capacity test?” Dick read. He shook his head, baffled. “The list goes on and on.”

“And every result came back normal,” Tim concluded. “According to every test, she was in perfect health.”

“So, either she was a hypochondriac, or—”

“—or whatever she had wasn’t on the list of things her doctor could test for.”

“She went to the LexCorp clinic a few times during that time period, too,” Dick pointed out. “But there’s very little detail in those doctors’ notes.”

“Unfortunately,” Tim agreed. He reached over Dick to get to the mouse and scroll down through the medical records that Bruce had in his case file. “She definitely wasn’t a hypochondriac. Prior to this, she’d only been to the doctor a few times per year. Something was wrong, and she was trying to figure out what it was.”

Something sparked in Dick’s memory suddenly, and he picked up the Bat-tablet again. “You said Siemens had respiratory symptoms?”

“Uh, yeah, back in February,” said Tim, scrolling around again on both monitors. Dick, meanwhile, went to Dr. Rota’s section of Bruce’s complete file.

“Here it is,” said Dick. “‘Rota had reported feeling unwell to her friend and sister in the two days leading up to her disappearance. I was unable to find anything medically significant in the autopsy report that would have explained this— no signs of poison or illness,’” he read out loud. At Tim’s confused look, he added, “Batman’s notes.”

“Hm,” said Tim, which was a lot more of a muted reaction than Dick was expecting. Maybe he was getting used to this after all.

Dick’s eyes moved back to the tablet, and he scrolled up a little, skimming Bruce’s victim profile for Rota. The note about her feeling unwell was part of what he remembered, but he was sure that he’d seen something else, something clearer. He just couldn’t remember what or where.

“Bingo,” he said a minute later when he found it.

“What?” asked Tim.

Dick handed him the Bat-tablet. “Look at the transcript of her voicemail to Dr. Marcus,” he said. “Tell me if you see what I see.”

Tim fixed him with a puzzled look before focusing on the screen. Dick watched his eyes move quickly left to right as he read the text. After a few seconds, he cocked his head to the side. Then a few seconds after that, his mouth dropped open and he looked up at the monitors again. He scrolled to Siemens’ records, then went back to the tablet. Then back to the monitor, then over to Dick.

“I see it,” he said, and Dick fought to keep the smile off his face.

“What do you see?” he asked. *Robin,* he added silently.

“Respiratory symptoms,” Tim explained. He went on in a rush. “Look at this— ‘sniff’, ‘throat-clearing’, ‘coughing’, ‘sniff’, ‘cough’, ‘sniff’. He transcribed it so many times!”

“But he didn’t know it meant anything,” Dick added. “Without the personnel records showing absences from work, and the dual sets of medical records, Batman had no idea that Rota’s coughing or the fact that she said she didn’t feel well might be significant to the case.”

“Wow,” said Tim, and Dick beamed.

“Wow is right,” he said. “You just found us a new lead, Bug.”

“Wow,” Tim said again. “This is awesome.”

“Yeah.”

“I mean,” Tim amended a second later, “it’s not awesome that four people are dead.”

“Well. No.”

“But this— this detective work? This is awesome.”

“It sure is, Timmy,” Dick agreed.

Welcome to the family, he didn’t add, but he wanted to.

Chapter 54

Chapter Summary

Alfred takes a trip. Batman can solve one mystery, as a treat.

I wanted to take pictures of Batman.

Jason's bedroom door had opened with a familiar but long-forgotten creak. Alfred had been meaning to oil it for days before... *before.* After, such things didn't matter.

The bookshelves were overflowing. He'd forgotten that, too. How many were unfinished? Unstarted? How many had been read more than once? How many loved? How many hated?

The desk's surface was cluttered— half-written pages, open textbooks, the small lump of modelling clay, long dried out by now, that Jason used to squeeze between his fingers as he worked on math problems, claiming it helped him focus. The grooves of his fingerprints were still visible, frozen in time and space.

Alfred stood in the centre of the room, *Wuthering Heights* in hand, staring at the dusty cluttered desk, the loaded bookshelves. He didn't know what to do. He'd spent so long searching for this book after... *after.* He'd never once considered where he'd put the thing once he had it.

There was another problem. Bruce had never come in here when Alfred could see him, but he did come in here. He would spot the book out in the open. He'd made a career of spotting things that were out of place, after all.

If the very act of putting the book back into this room felt like violating a sacred space, hiding it was worse. Moving things around, disturbing the scene... it felt wrong. And it would create lines in the dust that Bruce would notice in a split-second, and Alfred would have to explain.

He had to hide the book. But he couldn't make his arms obey him. He didn't want to touch things, to move the unfinished homework or the modelling clay that had served as a study aid. He didn't even want to brush the damn pencil shavings off the desk. He didn't want to oil the door hinges, or pick up that sock that hadn't quite made it into the

laundry hamper, or straighten the bedspread.

He didn't want to be in here at all. The space was too empty, too full. But he couldn't leave, either. He stood, book in hand, frozen in place while someone spoke far away, and a machine droned, and ice clinked in glasses, and someone laughed, and someone else turned a page in another book. The wrong book. The wrong Brontë.

She glanced up and did a double take when she caught Alfred's eyes on her. He forced his mouth to quirk up—friendly, apologetic—and looked away. The young woman went back to *Jane Eyre*.

Alfred stared at the back of the seat in front of him. His eyes stung. He blinked furiously, but his vision stayed blurry. He raised one hand to his face, covering his mouth just as a quietly horrendous sound issued forth from his throat. His shoulders shook.

"Sir?" said a woman's voice, soft and close.

Alfred turned his head. It was a flight attendant, crouched in the aisle beside his seat.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

Alfred nodded. "Yes. Yes, just— I'm fine."

An understanding smile flickered over her face. "Travelling for a funeral?" she guessed.

Alfred didn't correct her, merely taking the packet of tissues she offered. "Thank you."

"Of course, sir," she replied. She seemed about to stand, then changed her mind and spoke again. "If it makes you feel better, this happens a lot. Somehow, it just doesn't feel real until you're on the plane."

Alfred nodded, his eyes welling up again, and she left with a reminder that she was available to help if he needed anything else. Of course she was. This was first class. A step down from Bruce's private jet—and that had been an almost-argument before he left—but still luxurious. Over the next few hours, Alfred could get anything he wanted.

Except, of course, the one thing he needed.

All the best stories started this way: empty manor house, rain lashing

the windows, wind howling in the trees outside. Long shadows danced when the lightning flashed. Footsteps echoed down long hallways. The fire flickered behind the grate, but still the darkness crept in at every corner and grew just out of sight, tricking the eye, the mind.

Was there someone at the window? Did that shadow just move, stretch out an arm, reach for him when his back was turned?

No. He was the only spirit lurking in this ancient, empty manor. He was the figure at the window, he was the stretching shadow. He was the darkness— no, he was worse. He was what the darkness feared.

And he was... *bored.*

He heaved a long sigh and pushed himself up and out of the armchair by the fireplace. He'd thought that the flames would help to settle his mind as well as keep back the damp. But his hair was still curling slightly with rain, and his mind was still restless. He turned off the gas fireplace and left the dark room as thunder once again rumbled through the house.

He'd returned an hour ago. With Tim gone, he had decided to do a longer patrol than usual, but he came back with little to show for it. The weather was so miserable tonight that even the rogues didn't want to go out. Eventually, he'd given up and returned to the Cave, to the manor, soaking wet and with something unsettled under his skin.

Alfred was gone, too. When Dick decided to take Tim to Blüdhaven, Bruce gave Alfred a couple days off. Alfred caught a last-minute flight to Topeka, and checked in via text message a few hours later to announce that he'd safely arrived in Smallville, and that Martha and Jonathan said hello. Dick had texted, too, just after midnight, to report that all was well on his end, and Tim was asleep.

Now it was almost 4 in the morning, and he had only the storm for company. Maybe it was the atmospheric energy keeping him agitated. Maybe it was bad memories of other rainy nights spent alone.

Or maybe it was the uneventful patrol. Maybe he craved the release that came from hard exercise, from violence. If it were that simple, a stint in the Cave's training simulations would cure him. Maybe it would. Maybe he could try it.

But the idea was repellent for reasons that he couldn't quite articulate. So, too, was the thought of going to the computer and doing casework, even though Oracle had pinged him during patrol to say

that she was sending him an information package that they should review together.

He didn't want to do that right now, and he didn't know why.

It bothered him— no. It didn't bother him; something *was bothering* him.

As he roamed the halls, not making a sound that would be heard over the storm even if someone else were present to hear it, he let his mind wander, too, passing over the events of the night, of the day, of the past few days, searching for the source of his unease.

He found himself in the public wing, outside the fitness room. The double mahogany doors were standing open. Inside, several blinds were still up. The rain was loud.

This was where it had started, hours ago. Before his patrol, before Tim left, before Alfred left. Before the day's drizzle turned into real rain. Before the storm blew in. *This* was where the thought that was bothering him had first occurred.

I wanted to take pictures of Batman.

The room flashed white. Thunder shook the house. He knew where he had to go next.

Bruce didn't want to. He knew it was a violation of trust, an invasion of personal space. *It wouldn't be right,* he protested, but his feet kept moving anyway.

He stopped in the hall lined with family photographs. Alfred wasn't here tonight to tell him this was a bad idea, or to remind him of who Tim needed him to be.

I gave this room to him to be his*,* Bruce thought, but his hand was already on the doorknob. *A getaway space,* he remembered saying, *not somewhere that Dick, Alfred, and I will be hanging out, unless you invite us in.*

Bruce hadn't once been invited in. Dick had spent an afternoon here, back in August when Tim was grounded, but after handing it to Tim on his birthday, Bruce hadn't seen the inside. He'd hoped— he'd even asked, at dinner when Tim mentioned a night photography hobby for the first and only time: *I'd like to see some of your shots sometime. If you're willing to show me.*

Clearly, Tim hadn't been willing. The only photos Bruce saw were of Dick showing off in the fitness room; exterior shots of the manor; and pictures from their weekend in Metropolis. All taken during the day, none at night.

But photography was what Tim had been planning to do that night when he circumvented the manor's security system and snuck out. He wasn't going to see his parents, or walking off a bad dream, or even running away. And Bruce was willing to bet that on at least a few of those nights when his former foster parents caught him out well after curfew, Tim had been wandering the city, taking pictures.

Of Batman.

No, Bruce argued. *He was dreaming. It didn't mean anything.*

He turned the knob and entered. Tim had left all the blinds down, letting the darkroom live up to its name. He hit the light switch. Let his eyes do a slow sweep, left to right, not knowing what he was looking for but sensing that he'd know it when he saw it.

Photographs hung from the wire. Trays were stacked neatly on the lab bench. The chemical cupboard was closed and locked, key hanging from its hook. PPE, changing bag, photographic paper— everything was in the closet, exactly where it belonged. He took silent steps towards the wire. The photos, long dry by now, were more daytime shots— pictures of Tim's friends.

See? Nothing.

Undeterred, he walked away. Past the lab bench, past the closet, to the nook just inside the door, with its cozy armchair and lamp. An upside down paperback rested on the end table— *Twelfth Night.* Literature wasn't Tim's strong suit (unlike...). Alfred had been helping him parse the language. One night last week after dinner, the three of them had read a few scenes aloud, because Alfred insisted that the comedy became a lot clearer that way. And it had worked. Bruce smiled, remembering Tim laughing at Malvolio's cross garters.

He turned away from the chair, away from the memory, and instead examined the photos that Tim had taped to the wall: his friend Pat at the arcade in Kingston; Dick flipping in mid-air; a snowy scene at the downtown holiday market; a shot of the river at dusk; and the full moon over Gotham Cathedral.

What were you expecting to find? Even if he had a habit of taking pictures

of you, he wouldn't hang them up where just anyone could—

Wait. The cathedral. Something about that image felt familiar, though he knew he'd never seen it before.

The photo was taken from up high. Not quite as high as the bell tower itself, of course; nothing in that neighbourhood was as tall as the bell tower. Although the moon was the photo's central focus, the gargoyles in the foreground were impossible to mistake. They were the grim guardians of the east side of the tower, with none of the playfulness of their neighbours on the west face.

He leaned in for a closer look, drawn by another small detail: a half-constructed tower in the background. He could tell from the storeys that had been completed that it was the Liberty Hills condo. He cast his mind back, trying to recall. He'd have to look it up to be certain, but he thought that construction on the tower had finished two years ago in June, with residents moving in by September.

He ran a hand down his face and let out a breath. Assuming he was right about the dates, this picture had been taken more than two years ago— well before Tim had left his parents' house, meaning that he had been running around the city, unsupervised, at night, for longer than Bruce even imagined.

He leaned back from the image, looked around the darkroom again. Was it really possible?

No, Bruce insisted. *Even if he was outdoors at night with a camera, that doesn't mean—*

He took his phone out of his pocket and pulled up the post on the batarazzi's blog that had appeared just days after Tim moved into the manor.

hate to disapoint but i was high af as usual

He remembered scrutinizing this photo in the Cave because, for a few seconds, he'd thought that the batarazzi had been following him the night before. But careful analysis had made him realize that it wasn't a recent photo. The blog post showed an image of him on the west side of the bell tower, but he'd been on the east side that night, and the visible parts of the sky were bright in the photo, but it had been a new moon. And—

He zoomed in on the background. He couldn't see the Liberty Hills

condo from this angle, but there was part of the same construction crane that was in the other shot.

“Oh my god,” Bruce murmured, because he couldn’t deny it any longer. These photos were taken on the same night. These photos were taken by the same person.

Tim.

Another piece of evidence, not that he needed it: the batarazzi had an almost uncanny ability to find him— or he did, until Tim moved into Wayne Manor. Suddenly the blog began posting older photos, like this one and the image of Jason that he claimed came from his archives. Bruce didn’t know, then, why the blogger had changed tactics, but now he had an inkling. When he’d come upstairs the night the cathedral photo was posted, he’d found Tim still awake, still on his computer. Tim must have seen the video of Batman that was going viral online and decided to capitalize on it. Maybe he was trying to keep his blog current, seeing as he knew he wouldn’t be able to get any new shots while he was staying at the manor, far away from his usual haunts.

Bruce looked down again at the blog post displayed on his phone and compared it to the image on the wall. The similarities were as worrisome as they were indisputable. These pictures were both taken the same night, two and a half years ago. Tim wasn’t even thirteen years old then. Bruce shook his head. How had nobody—*not even Batman*—noticed that a child was running around Gotham alone at night, for three years or more?

He was right there, he thought, staring at the image of himself on the cathedral two years ago. *He was right there, and I missed it.*

Bruce had no idea what to do with this information. What *could* he do? He didn’t want to let this stand—it was much too dangerous—but he couldn’t confront Tim about it directly without admitting he was Batman. He could make something up, he supposed. He could weave a web of lies to explain how he’d discovered Tim’s hobby, so he could tell Tim that he didn’t think it was safe, but that was risky. There were too many chances of entangling himself and accidentally revealing something.

The better option would be to say nothing, to never address it, to just focus on keeping Tim home and safe and supervised. But Tim was fifteen; Bruce couldn’t keep him here forever. As Tim got older, he’d

go out on his own more often. In a year, he'd have a driver's licence and—Bruce's heart skipped a beat—if he was still here, Bruce would more than likely give him a car of his own. There would be parties, late-night study sessions, possibly even part-time jobs that would take him out of the manor on evenings and weekends. And, a few years after that, he'd be going to college.

So, when Tim went out, Batman would go out, too, he decided, and he'd be a hell of a lot more vigilant. He knew what to look for now, and he'd been compiling a list of the batarazzi's preferred vantage points for years. If their paths crossed—and he might take steps to make sure their paths crossed—then *Batman* could take care of telling Tim to stop this dangerous hobby.

He wouldn't tell Alfred what he'd discovered tonight, though. Or Dick. He didn't want to alter either of their opinions on Tim. And he didn't want them to worry about him the way Bruce was going to worry about him. This was something he would bear on his own shoulders—as much as possible, anyway.

A particularly loud boom of thunder made him jump. With all the blinds in the darkroom closed, he hadn't seen the lightning that had preceded it. He shook himself and took another look around the room, making sure he'd left nothing out of place.

His eyes lingered on the photographs taped to the wall. For a moment, he set aside his worry over the dangerous nature of Tim's hobby. He thought, just for a moment, about coming clean, about telling Tim that it was him he'd been chasing with his camera for years.

He looked down at his phone again and scrolled up, even though he knew what he would see. He knew it would be painful.

from my archives

It was the possibly the best picture he'd ever seen of Jason, and one of only a handful where he was dressed as Robin. Those types of photos were dangerous collateral in the wrong hands, after all, so he didn't make a habit of taking them.

But the batarazzi—*Tim*—had. He no doubt had dozens— more than the ones he had shared publicly. In all this time, he'd never posted anything compromising on his blog, never speculated about Batman or Robin's identity. And the blog had gained a reputation: Tim shot Batman and Robin like heroes, inviting the city to see them that way, too. People *liked* Tim's photographs. Back when he'd first started his

mission, Batman was basically an urban legend, and those who knew he was real definitely didn't see him as heroic. But Robin, time, and publicity like Tim's blog had since turned the tide.

The way these children keep finding their way to you, he heard Alfred say again. *It's remarkable.*

Bruce had a growing feeling that *remarkable* wasn't nearly a strong enough word to describe whatever Tim was.

Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

> Saturday morning in Blüdhaven. Tim thinks too much and drinks too much coffee. Dick has a surprise up his sleeve.
>
> *"No more coffee for you," Dick announced. "I wasn't supposed to let you have more than one per day."*
>
> *"You also weren't supposed to let me work a quadruple homicide," Tim pointed out.*

The spare bedroom in Dick's apartment got a lot of light. Like, a *lot.* It also had black-out curtains, but Tim had forgotten to close them last night. So when the obnoxiously bright morning sun stabbed his eyeballs at 7-something—after he and Dick had gone to bed at 3-something—he stumbled up and across the room, yanked the curtains shut, and fell right back onto his pillow. He lay there a moment, just basking in the dark and quiet, hoping to drop off again any moment.

Unfortunately, the sun seemed to have activated the thinking part of his brain. Instead of falling asleep, his mind started zipping around the last 24 hours. Waking up yesterday morning in his bedroom at Wayne Manor, he hadn't thought he'd be here in Blüdhaven a day later. But it was more than just that. In the time since he'd gotten out of bed yesterday, he'd trained with Batman. He'd told Nightwing the truth about who he was and how much he knew. He'd met Oracle. He'd worked on an active criminal case with the hero he'd looked up to for years.

It was fun. It felt good, and, lying here in the dark, Tim grinned up at the ceiling. He hadn't known—he hadn't expected—that he could have any of this.

But, slowly, his smile started to fade. His mind, like a stone skipping across the surface of a pond, eventually sank. He *couldn't* have this—not really. He was just... borrowing it for a bit. Because as soon as Nightwing or Batman found out about the role his parents had played in the LexCorp case, they would be well within their rights to bar him from it— and probably other ones, too. After all, Tim's parents' actions reflected on him just as much they always told him his actions reflected on them. Batman and Nightwing probably wouldn't want anything to do with the son of people who, at best, knew LexCorp was

responsible for the scientists' deaths, and, at worst, well....

It had been a unexpected relief not to find Drake Industries listed as the client for the generator. He'd feared that it would happen like that — that Oracle would send them the financials, and his family's name would be right there for everyone to see. Dick would know at once what it meant and who Tim's 'anonymous source' was, and everything would come crashing down around him. But that hadn't happened. Instead, it was some other company's name listed as the client: Dunbar Holdings. The name sounded vaguely familiar, but Tim didn't have any clue why. Oracle had said she could start researching, but Tim decided that he would, too.

And since Dick was still asleep, he thought suddenly, now might be the perfect opportunity to get started.

He got out of bed again, this time going to the door instead of the window. The apartment was silent—Dick had explained that he'd installed extra soundproofing right after he'd moved in, for obvious reasons—and rather dark, with the worst of the sun hidden blocked by more dark curtains pulled across the patio door. (Dark curtains, Tim was learning, were mandatory for nighttime vigilantes.)

The living/dining room was exactly how they'd left it a few hours ago: Dick's souped-up laptop was on the table, his extra monitors dark and lifeless; empty glasses and dirty plates were on the floor near the sofa, from when they took a break at midnight to eat pizza and watch an episode of a ridiculous improvised game show that Dick had gotten really into lately; and Dick's socks were scattered several feet apart because he got annoyed and peeled them off around 2, tossing them in opposite directions. The Bat-tablet was still resting on the couch cushion where Tim had nearly fallen asleep and dropped it on his face before Dick grabbed it and announced it was time for bed.

In other words, the place was a mess. Tim loved it.

Tim took the tablet with him into the kitchen, and logged in with the password Dick had taught him, before raiding the cupboards to find pods for the coffee machine. A few minutes later, he took the tablet and a steaming mug of black coffee back to the couch and settled in to read.

Dick had loaded the cloned copy of LexCorp's client database onto the tablet without even asking why Tim wanted that information at his fingertips. Tim opened it—ignoring the squirm of guilt in the pit of his

stomach at the thought that he might be betraying Dick's trust—and typed his own surname into the database's search bar. His parents' names and smiling headshots appeared at the top of the results, followed by *Founder and Co-CEO*. Below them were other names and titles, like *Vice-President of Development, CFO, Project Manager*.... Tim didn't care about any of those.

He went to his mother's contact page first, since she had spoken most directly to Cronin at the party about purchasing the generator. To Tim's surprise, however, she was affiliated with no LexCorp projects. Tim frowned and checked his father's entry, blaming corporate misogyny when he found Jack listed as the DI contact on three projects. Tim made a note of these project names and numbers, then exited the CRM and opened Oracle's folders that contained the details and financials for the generator .

He was immediately disappointed. None of the numbers or names associated with his father matched that of the generator project (AKA Project Gemini). The *Project Financials* folder was another almost-instant letdown. In fact, there was no mention of Drake Industries whatsoever in any of the documents.

Tim sighed and set his empty coffee cup down on the floor. It made no sense. He was positive his mother had said they'd signed a purchase agreement with LexCorp. Tim specifically remembered her icy calm as she informed Cronin that DI was getting nervous about having signed off on the agreement when the generator prototype wasn't even finished. If Tim was recalling correctly—and he knew he was—Cronin had even agreed with her on that point. Both of his parents had seemed to know certain things about the generator, speaking like they were hands-on with the project, like they were entitled to updates that Cronin seemed unwilling to give them. That was what had led their conversation into the discussion of an accident in the first place. Why would that conversation had happened if DI wasn't involved?

Tim didn't know. And, short of asking Oracle to make another run on LexCorp, he had no idea how he was going to get enough information to make any sense of this.

He looked down at the project financials again. Dunbar Holdings. He wracked his brain, trying to figure out why it rang a bell. Dunbar was a fairly common name, but Tim didn't think it was just that. Had his father or mother ever mentioned Dunbar when they talked about work? Had he ever met someone at a charity ball or gala with that name?

Maybe it was unrelated. Maybe one of his classmates at Gotham Academy was named Dunbar, or it was something else just as ordinary.

Well, he thought, getting up to make more coffee. *This is why we have the internet.*

Dick awoke to the sound of his poor old coffee machine. It made a particular noise at the end of its cycle, which Dick had suspected for some time was the mechanical equivalent of a death rattle. He'd picked the thing up at a garage sale during his very first weekend in Blüdhaven, though, so it seemed an insult to its years of service to retire it before it actually quit. For now, it still did its job and did it well— he could smell the coffee, and it smelled really good.

It was almost good enough to get him out of bed, but his room was so dark and his eyelids were so heavy....

The next time Dick opened his eyes, he actually managed to look at his phone and discover it was after nine. He didn't know how long ago the coffeemaker had woken him, and even as he sat up, the machine rattled in the kitchen again. Tim was clearly putting it through its paces.

And *that* was when he remembered promising Bruce that he wouldn't let Tim have more than one cup of coffee per day.

"Whoops," he said under his breath as he got dressed. He had already broken plenty of Bruce's rules this weekend, but limiting the kid's caffeine was probably all-around a good thing.

He opened the blackout curtains slowly. The sun was bright, but heavy clouds on the horizon suggested that Gotham would sending some rain in Blüdhaven's direction before too long. (Typical.) Dick wandered into his ensuite bathroom, yawning at every step of his morning routine. Then he tamed his bedhead as best he could and left the room.

He found Tim near the balcony door, his neck bent as he read something off the Bat-tablet. A cup of coffee, still steaming, was on the dining room table.

"Morning," Dick said brightly.

Tim yelped and jumped— Dick would swear that both his socked feet

actually left the ground.

“Sorry,” Dick said with a wince.

“It’s okay,” said Tim, making an obvious effort to slow his breathing as he turned to face him. “You’d think I’d be used to that by now.”

“Used to what?” Dick asked. He headed to the kitchen, hoping that his elderly machine had enough life in it to make him a cup, too. (If not, he was stealing Tim’s.)

“You and Bruce move like ninjas,” Tim told him as he followed. “Extremely quiet ninjas.”

“Occupational hazard,” Dick half-apologized, opening his cupboards to find first a mug, then a coffee pod. “Comes in handy, but…”

“Yeah, *but,”* Tim agreed. “Bruce has gotten a lot better now, at least. When I first moved in, he startled me so often that Alfred threatened to get him a bell.”

Dick huffed a laugh as he fitted the pod into the machine. Alfred had been making that joke for years; Dick could only imagine how thrilled he was to have a new audience for it.

“Have you been up long?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Couple hours,” Tim replied.

Dick nodded, hit the button, then turned and took a few steps away from the noise. Tim followed again. He set the tablet down on the table and picked up his mug instead. Dick tried not to grimace when he saw that the coffee inside was pitch-black. That was how Bruce liked it, too, and Dick never understood that.

“Find anything interesting?” Dick asked, gesturing towards the tablet.

“Not really,” said Tim. “Dunbar Holdings is probably a shell company.”

“And that’s not interesting?”

Tim shrugged and sipped his coffee. “Just not that surprising.”

“Fair enough.”

The coffeemaker rattled, and Dick returned to the kitchen. Steam rose

as he opened the top and pulled out the used pod. He tossed it into the garbage bin under the sink and couldn't help but notice three other used pods sitting on the very top. He sighed and sent a pointed look at Tim, who was pretending to look perfectly innocent, so he looked really, really guilty.

"No more coffee for you," Dick announced. "I wasn't supposed to let you have more than one per day."

"You also weren't supposed to let me work a quadruple homicide," Tim pointed out.

"Working a quadruple homicide doesn't stunt your growth."

Tim rolled his eyes and went back to the living room. Dick opened another cupboard and pulled out the sugar bowl. One spoonful went into his mug, then he opened the fridge and remembered that he was supposed to stop at the store for cream last night. He sighed. Two spoonfuls of sugar, then, he decided, suppressing another yawn as he stirred the unlightened coffee.

"Okay, so Dunbar's a dead end," he summarized, taking his mug to the couch.

"Unless Oracle can dig something up," Tim agreed, sitting down beside him.

He leaned forward and spun his laptop in Dick's direction. He proceeded to walk Dick through the results of his still-way-too-early-in-the-morning-to-be-doing-this investigation: Dunbar Holdings' website was slick but empty of meaningful content; the staff listed there had almost no online presence, with their corporate headshots being the only images that consistently came up in web searches; and the company's listed address seemed to be an apartment complex in Star City.

"Nice," Dick said when Tim was done. "But I vote we leave this for now." He swallowed the last mouthful of his coffee and stood up. "Let's go get some breakfast."

Tim did the same, but Dick could tell he wasn't really willing to leave the case behind yet.

"After we eat, I want to show you something," Dick added, to soften the blow, as they headed towards the door.

“What is it?”

“A surprise.” Dick handed Tim his jacket, and he reluctantly started putting it on. “But I promise you’ll like it.”

An hour or so later, Dick stepped out of the diner, blinking in the bright sun.

“So, where to now?” asked Tim from behind him. Dick half-turned to see him also squinting— the kid was Gotham City through and through.

“This way,” he said, pointing. “And stay kinda close,” he added in a lower voice. “Where we’re going isn’t exactly the nicest neighbourhood.”

“Got it,” Tim confirmed and moved smoothly into place at Dick’s side.

They walked in silence for several minutes, Dick leading them away from downtown. They walked along quiet residential streets, the homes getting smaller and shabbier the further they went. Dick kept his posture loose, his expression on the nicer side of neutral, but his eyes stayed sharp like they always were when he headed this way. The last thing he needed was to get followed.

There was a muted buzz beside him, and Tim pulled out his phone. “Oh no,” he said under his breath.

“What’s wrong?” Dick asked, as Tim started to type.

“Nothing. I just forgot to tell Bernard I was going out of town. He wanted to hang out this afternoon.”

“I can drive you back,” Dick offered.

“No,” Tim said instantly.

“Okay,” Dick laughed. “Sorry, Bernard, whoever you are.”

“He’s just a friend,” said Tim, but his cheeks were pink. He finished typing and put his phone away. “Anyway. Hanging out with you is way cooler and way more important.”

“Again: sorry, Bernard.”

Tim’s face was really red now. “It’s not that Bernard’s *not* cool or not

important. He is. He's actually really cool, and— and I like him, and Ives says he likes me back, so—"

"As a friend," Dick emphasized.

"Shut up," Tim muttered. Dick laughed again, but he nudged Tim's shoulder, too.

"I'm just teasing," he said. "It's cool that you like Bernard, and Bernard likes you. I hope it works out."

"Thanks," said Tim. His phone buzzed again, and Dick went back to scanning their surroundings while Tim answered the text.

"So what happened with you and Pat?" he asked, when Tim was done.

"Me and Pat?"

"Yeah. Did you guys break up, or...?"

"Oh. No," Tim answered. "We didn't even actually get together. Ives said they got over their crush on me when I didn't— wait. How do *you* know anything about that?"

"I'm a detective, Tim," said Dick, faux-serious. "I detected it."

"Uh huh," said Tim skeptically. Dick broke character and laughed.

"Alfred's been rooting for you two since that night you went to the movies," he explained. He caught a glimpse of Tim's wide eyes and went on when he didn't speak. "I only got invested because of Pat's letter, though."

"Letter?" Tim repeated. "What letter?"

Dick lowered his voice slightly— just in case. "The letter you left on the roof the day you took pictures in Kingston."

Tim sputtered for a second before he formed coherent words. "I— seriously, Dick, what are you talking about?"

"You didn't read it? No— wait," said Dick as the pieces finally clicked together. "You didn't even know about it."

Tim shook his head. "Pat didn't give me a letter. What did it say?"

"Oh," said Dick, uncomfortable. "Um. It was a— they just said they

liked you, and wanted to... date, I guess. That kind of thing."

"Oh," Tim echoed. His face was twisted up in thought. Dick had no idea how he was feeling.

"I guess Pat changed their mind," he went on, trying to walk a line between informative and empathetic— just in case Tim was heartbroken about the missed opportunity. "They must have tossed it aside instead of giving it to you."

"I guess," Tim said faintly.

"That does make more sense," Dick admitted, when Tim didn't go on. "I didn't think you would be so careless to leave it behind, given your track record and all."

Tim walked along beside him in silence. Dick kept talking.

"You know, Bruce actually found it the next night. Lucky for you he never received a single love note in high school. He thought it was just origami."

Dick glanced over and realized Tim had stopped dead in his tracks— by the looks of it, right about the time Dick had said the B-word. And his formerly pink cheeks were now rather pale.

"Hey," Dick said, doubling back. "Don't worry, okay? I didn't tell him anything."

The words didn't seem to soothe Tim at all, so Dick grabbed his forearms instead, trying to ground him through touch.

"I didn't—" Tim started, then shook his head. "They must have dropped it while we were up there, and I— I didn't even notice? But Bruce found it, and—"

"Hey," Dick said again, cutting him off. "It's alright. Nothing happened, he doesn't know."

"I know, but—" Tim blew out a sharp breath. "God, why am I freaking out about this *now?"*

"Because the scariest close calls are the ones you never even see?" Dick guessed. He squeezed Tim's arms again and took some slow, calming breaths. It took Tim a moment, but he mirrored Dick's breathing and nodded.

“It’s okay,” Dick added, once they’d done a few breaths together. “I took the note with me, and I still have it. When we get back to my place, you can read it, or take it home with you, or whatever. We can even burn it if it’ll make you feel better.”

“That seems a little extreme,” Tim said.

Dick huffed a laugh, surprised and relieved. “Well, in case you haven’t noticed, we’re kind of a dramatic family,” he said. “It’s best you come to terms with that sooner rather than later.”

Tim pulled away from him with an evasive little half-smile. He straightened his shoulders and seemed to shake himself back to reality. Dick did, too, glancing around them at the empty street.

“Come on,” he said, as he started walking again. “We’re almost there.”

“This is the surprise?” Tim said, when they stopped in front of a chainlink fence ten minutes later.

He sounded skeptical, and Dick couldn’t blame him. Behind the fence was a small rundown building— probably originally built as a house, but later renovated for commercial use as the street changed around it. A peeling sign over the boarded-up front window still had part of the old business’ name, but it was so faded by now that it was almost impossible to read. Laminated posters zip-tied to the fence declared that the building was condemned. Every few metres were black and red *No Trespassing* signs.

“This way,” said Dick, because Tim was staring.

He led them up to the narrow laneway, where a gate blocked their access. He pulled a key from his pants pocket and used it in the padlock. The gate moved with an unwilling scrape of metal on cement. Dick didn’t push it far, just enough for him and Tim to slip inside. Then, with a little finagling, he locked the gate behind them. He put the key back in his pocket and gestured for Tim to follow.

The building and its tiny parking lot were surrounded by mature coniferous trees, so Dick wasn’t too worried about being seen as they circled around to the back door. The back of the building looked just as bad as the front, with boards over the windows. A particularly large *DO NOT ENTER* sign was bolted to the centre of the door, and one of the building’s many, extremely obvious security cameras was pointed right at it.

Dick stuck a key in the deadbolt and twisted, then pulled the bottom edge of the sign forward a few centimetres and pressed his finger into a tiny groove on its backside. With a muted electronic beep and a tiny click, the door unlocked. He twisted the knob and entered, Tim hot on his heels. The door latched and locked behind them, blocking out all natural light. The air was still, the atmosphere stuffy.

“Now what?” Tim asked, hushed in the darkness.

“Honey, I’m home,” Dick said in a particular voice, with a particular cadence.

“Wh—” Tim jumped in surprise as the overhead lights switched on, illuminating every corner of the large room they were standing in.

Dick watched him take in every detail—the multiple layers of paint that were flaking off the walls, the hardwood floor so scuffed it resembled the texture of cement—before landing on the stacked cages against the left wall with more than a little apprehension.

“What is this place?” he asked.

“Until about ten years ago, it was a vet clinic,” Dick answered. He gestured to the solid steel door directly across from them. “The exam rooms and waiting area were out there, but it’s sealed off now.”

“Ten years?” Tim repeated with some surprise.

Dick nodded. “Bruce bought it about eighteen months ago, though you won’t see his name on the deed. Officially, the goal is to tear it down and put up a low-rise apartment building. But there’s a lot of paperwork required to make that happen— rezoning, geological surveys, building permits... it takes forever, especially in a city that’s as non-functional and corrupt as Blüdhaven.”

“I would think it’d be faster here,” said Tim.

“If you’re willing to bribe city officials, sure,” Dick conceded with a crooked smile. “But the new owner, he’s a pretty scrupulous guy.”

Tim huffed a laugh but frowned again a second later. Dick guessed—correctly—that he had another question. “Aren’t you worried somebody might break in?”

“People have done it,” Dick said honestly. “We get a few urban explorers, but once word got out that there was nothing in here worth

seeing, their interest tapered off. Once in a while somebody gets in on a cold night and uses it as a place to crash, but we don't mind that so much."

"Huh," said Tim. His eyes landed on the security camera hanging in the corner. "Is that live?" he asked, a little nervously.

"No, it's just for show," Dick reassured him. "When we took possession, we emptied the place out and put these huge cameras everywhere. Combined with this building's reputation, it seems to be enough to keep most people away."

"Reputation?"

"Back when this was a vet clinic, it wasn't just a vet clinic," Dick explained. "There was a steady stream of, uh... let's call them *non-furry patients,* who only came to see the doctor after-hours."

"Oh," Tim said softly.

Dick nodded. "Anybody who's anybody in the Blüdhaven criminal underworld has known for years that this was a place where you could get patched up." He shrugged. "Or put down."

Tim visibly shuddered.

"So now that it's under new ownership, with visible security cameras and a fence, most people want nothing to do with whatever's going on here."

"They think it's still a mob spot," Tim concluded.

"Yep," Dick affirmed. "Bruce told me that even wealthy out-of-town real estate developers won't touch this place. They're afraid of what they might find under the parking lot. Or in the walls. Or the basement."

Tim's eyes darted over to their right, where there was a recess in the floor and a half-dozen steps leading down. "Let me guess: that's where we're going?"

Dick just grinned at him and descended. At the foot of the stairs was a solid steel door with a deadbolt. He unlocked it with yet another key from his ring. He pressed his index finger into blank space just below the keyhole and heard the mechanism unlock. He turned the knob and, with a quick look over his shoulder to be sure that Tim was

following, he pushed the door open.

The lights came on when they entered, revealing a small but well-equipped training space. The basement had been divided into three rooms: the largest was where they stood now, with its mats, weight benches, weapons rack, and punching bags. The back corner was reserved for training with sims; the console blinked in standby on the other side of the room. Through the door to their left was a tiny bathroom, and the door on the right led to a kitchenette stocked with snacks and drinks, along with medical supplies in case of emergency.

“Whoa,” said Tim, stepping past Dick, his eyes wide as he took in the space. “Do you have a lot of places like this? Like, secret safehouses under the city?”

That wasn’t the question Dick had been expecting. “Yeah, actually,” he admitted. “A few.”

“That’s so cool.”

“Yeah.” Dick waited, but Tim still didn’t ask why they were here. Instead, he wandered towards the weapons rack— just looking, not touching.

“This one’s the biggest, so I figured it was the best option,” Dick went on. He hesitated, then said the rest. “Considering there are two of us.”

It took Tim a second to catch on. To freeze. To turn around. “No,” he said softly.

Dick shrugged. “Why not?”

Tim didn’t answer the question, but he did say, “I’m dreaming.”

“No, you’re not,” Dick laughed. He took off his jacket and tossed it aside, gesturing for Tim to do the same. “Let’s have some fun.”

Chapter 56

Chapter Summary

Bruce turns his attention to another mystery. Dick takes Tim out for lunch.

“My brother’s allergic to shellfish, so can you make sure—”

Tim didn’t hear the rest of that sentence.

Bruce slept late the next day, with no Alfred to wake him and no kids making noise. After a basic breakfast in the kitchen, he took a second cup of coffee downstairs with him to the Cave. He’d solved one little mystery, but the bigger case was still open, and he had new evidence to review.

The information package from Oracle was enormous and divided into three folders: *Employee Records*_*Talk to Dick, Project Files,* and *Project Finances*. _*Talk to Dick* was surprising— Bruce hadn’t known that Dick was actively working the LexCorp case. Dick had done some legwork, like following up on the Blüdhaven mortuary—which unfortunately turned out to be a dead end—but other than that, he hadn’t been very hands-on. And he hadn’t mentioned this case the last time they’d talked shop. Bruce wondered what had changed to get him interested.

But he wouldn’t be able to ask Dick about it for several hours at least, so he shelved his curiosity for now and instead opened the folder he was most interested in: *Project Files.* The package seemed to contain everything about the generator project, which was officially known as Project Gemini. It was a predictable and not very creative name. But accurate, Bruce supposed, flipping through the documents. The file included hundreds of pages of notes, detailed progress reports, diagrams, schematics, related research papers, photographs, and even video clips. Bruce swallowed another mouthful of coffee and started reading.

He was familiar with the overall premise of the generator. Its purpose was to help small clinics in underfunded areas produce required medicines in a short period of time. These clinics were often unable to keep a large, stable supply of medication on hand, so they usually relied on shipments from elsewhere to get what they needed. In an emergency, any delays in receiving needed medication was literally a matter of life and death.

Project Gemini aimed to solve this problem. The idea, as AJ explained and as Rota echoed in her proposal here, was that smaller clinics would be able to keep a key set of shelf-stable drug components on hand instead of the finished products, which had shorter lifespans. The generator would reproduce required components when needed to tide these clinics over until a new supply shipment could arrive. For instance, the generator could create much-needed antibiotics in a mass casualty event, or drugs that would treat acute symptoms during a disease outbreak, thus saving lives.

It was a noble, impossible goal. A pipe dream, as AJ put it. Because, n order for the generator to work, it would need to be able to make something out of nothing. AJ had never been able to get anywhere with it for this exact reason.

But, according to the files Bruce had open before him, LexCorp had something that AJ didn't: a mysterious material known only as Substance X, which LexCorp had acquired through a different project, called Project Alcat. The project files contained no details about Alcat, but it was clear that it had led LexCorp to acquire Substance X from another planet or possibly an alternate dimension. Though Bruce was equal parts curious and concerned about Alcat—and he would definitely be bringing this to Superman and the rest of the Justice League—the origin of Substance X wasn't important to the generator. What mattered was what Substance X could do.

Rota's team seemed to be one of many at LexCorp who were studying the properties of the substance. Substance X apparently had the ability to replicate any material it touched. Not only that, it replicated the material and doubled in volume for a set period of time. From what Bruce could gather, Rota pitched the idea of applying Substance X to her and AJ's dream machine. Once the higher-ups had signed off on the project, she and her team got to work building a prototype.

Bruce had to pause here and switch gears. From the project files he had in front of him, Rota's team had been active on the project much longer than he'd thought. He opened the *Employee Records* folder and saw Oracle's note that the files LexCorp had sent to the GCPD had been tampered with.

"Fuck," he muttered.

He should have known; he should have guessed. He should have been better; he used to be better. There was a time, not that long ago, when he would have vetted the records thoroughly, when paranoia would

have driven him to be perfect, to miss nothing, to doubt everything. But now— since—

You haven't been around as much lately.

He ran a hand over his face. First Tim, now this. What else had he missed?

This wasn't productive, he reminded himself after a few seconds of wallowing. He shook off the guilt as best he could and went back to the project files.

Structurally, the generator was a relatively simple device. It had a large central chamber where someone would place the material they wished to reproduce. A drop of Substance X would then be added, and the generator sustained a stable environment—temperature, light, air pressure, etc.—in which the replication could occur. It also captured and stored the byproduct of the replication— a gas. Bruce tried, but he couldn't discover any facts about the nature of this gas. It seemed like Rota's team did nothing beyond producing it and storing it; if LexCorp was studying the gas, that was within someone else's purview.

The lack of information about Substance X's byproduct was especially frustrating when Bruce reached a multi-page incident report dated January 5th.

The report contained written accounts from all four of the scientists present. He read them carefully; each contained slight variations, but Bruce ultimately concluded that they were not attempting to deceive the reader or conceal anything about the accident. Anthony Siemens, the third victim of this crime and an experienced, safety conscious lab supervisor, had included a top-down diagram of the lab set-up that showed everyone's position at the time of the incident. Blake Hiss and Tiffany Close were nearest to the generator. Siemens was behind them, and Dr. Rota was the furthest away. Based on the diagram, it was reasonable to assume that the differences in each scientist's account were due to their differing perspectives—not everyone could see the exact same things based on where they were positioned—as well as the general chaos of the accident.

All accounts agreed that Hiss was the first to notice an issue with the generator's containment vessel. According to their account, Hiss could visibly see the byproduct of Substance X's reaction escaping the generator within minutes of the experiment beginning. They described

the gas as a sparkling grey, comparing it to blowing snow on a sunny day. Interestingly, Close called it a light purple, but agreed that it glittered strangely. Siemens, who was further away, said it looked like steam, and Rota likewise referred to it as mist.

Seconds after Hiss verbally acknowledged the problem, equipment in the lab alerted the team to an unsafe concentration of fine and ultrafine particles in the air. Rota deactivated the generator at once, killing all power to the machine while Siemens activated the lab's emergency ventilation systems. Hiss and Close, meanwhile, were still attempting to manually reposition the containment vessel. Hiss wrote that it "felt off", speculating that it hadn't been screwed in properly before the experiment began. Close agreed with Hiss' assessment, noting that the containment vessel "seemed loose" when she was trying to hold it in place alongside them. However, Siemens, who had been the last to inspect the generator before the experiment began, had noted that all parts of the device were in perfect working order. Rota and Close both observed a slightly different sound when the generator started that day; Rota later wondered in her notes if the sound was of air escaping the containment vessel before Substance X was even added.

Bruce leaned back from his desk. Could the experiment have been sabotaged? If so, by whom? And for what purpose? His only suspects in this case were the Falcones and LexCorp itself, and neither of them had a solid motive for destroying the generator. In fact, both had a vested interest in getting the generator working: the Falcones wanted a game changer in the drug trade, and LexCorp wanted to sell the generator for profit.

Furthermore, even if LexCorp or the Falcones had the motive, their means and the opportunity were lacking. As far as Bruce could tell, the only people who had access to the generator in the lead-up to the experiment were Rota and her team. It was, of course, possible that one of the scientists was compromised. Motivated by their employer or by the Falcones, one of them could have deliberately sabotaged the experiment to keep the generator from getting to market. If so, however, they paid dearly for the crime.

What if the January 5th incident wasn't caused by malice, Bruce wondered next. What if it truly was just an unfortunate accident? He thought back to the theories he'd developed the same night he'd asked Oracle for help. Could LexCorp have hired the Falcones to kill Rota and her team in order to prevent them from speaking out about this incident? Could it be that Rota—or even Siemens—was threatening to

go public about the nature of the generator itself, to speak out about how unsafe this experiment was, or to blow the whistle on Substance X, and as a result they were murdered to keep them quiet?

Bruce re-read each scientist's incident report, but the answers to his questions remained elusive.

Eventually, he returned to the *Project Files* folder and noticed another file with the same date. He recognized the author at once: it was Sebastian Cronin, who now held Dr. Rota's job. Eagerly, Bruce opened the document. But unlike the others, Cronin's report had no written narrative of the accident. Instead, it appeared to be a log:

13:00 0μg/m3

13:05 3μg/m3

13:10 15μg/m3

13:11 20μg/m3

13:12 50μg/m3

13:13 72μg/m3

13:14 100μg/m3

13:15 89μg/m3

13:20 46μg/m3

13:25 17μg/m3

13:30 4μg/m3

14:00 0μg/m3

There was no explanation, no context. Not even a note about where these numbers came from, or what they were measuring. But Bruce had a guess.

According to Rota and her team, they had activated the generator around 1:00PM on January 5th. Things seemed to go badly right away, with Rota and Close noticing an unusual sound as soon as the machine started up, and Hiss raising the alarm about the escaping gas just minutes later. Given this timeline, Bruce's theory was that the numbers in Cronin's document measured the level of particulate

matter—the mist, as Rota described it—that had leaked from the device during the incident.

International air quality standards recommended exposure to no more than 15μg/m3 of particulate matter in a 24-hour period. Comparatively, the numbers in Cronin's document were frighteningly high, especially considering that air quality standards were set for particles that were known— such as dust, dirt, soot, smoke, and pollen. Whatever had come out of the generator on January 5th was something that no one had ever encountered before. Rota and her team had been effectively blasted with an unknown fine and/or ultrafine particulate matter. Worse, they had breathed this poor air for a full hour, since the reports from Rota's team said nothing about vacating the lab. Siemens had intervened to distribute face masks after activating the emergency ventilation systems, but by then it might have already been too late.

What kind of health effects would something like this have on the team, Bruce wondered. Poor air quality was a leading cause of death worldwide; particulate matter was classified as a carcinogen and was known to have impacts on the respiratory and cardiovascular systems.

Which begged the question: if Rota and her team hadn't been murdered, how long would they have had to live?

It was a dark question, one that Bruce had no way of answering. Once again, he'd hit a brick wall.

It was well after noon by the time Tim and Dick emerged from the former vet clinic. Tim kept an eye out while Dick locked everything up behind them, but the street was deserted, and it wasn't a mystery as to why. The earlier sun had disappeared behind a thick layer of cloud, and the wind had picked up. Tim felt tiny flecks of rain pepper his face as they walked.

He tugged his jacket around him tighter. He still felt a little sweaty from the unexpected—but awesome—workout. Dick had not only picked up from where Bruce left off, showing Tim where to aim his hands and elbows to deliver effective nerve strikes, but he'd also kicked things up a notch.

"Here," he'd said, holding out a staff.

Tim took it without thinking, distracted by watching Dick snap two escrima sticks together to create an almost identical weapon. It was

only a moment later, when Dick told him to mirror his movements with the staff, that Tim actually caught on to what was happening.

“Don’t you think this is a little advanced for me?” he asked, following along with the slow, controlled movements that Dick demonstrated.

“No... but this is.”

Dick broke the pattern abruptly, spinning his staff so fast it blurred, then thrust it towards Tim, who raised his own on instinct. The weapons collided with a loud *clack* that echoed in the underground space.

“Good,” said Dick, and— god, this was so embarrassing, but it was just like yesterday with Bruce. Tim felt his face go beet red, and he couldn’t stop grinning.

Dick proceeded to explain how he’d purposefully exaggerated his movements to telegraph his intention, suspecting that Tim would read it and act defensively. Then he broke down other movements, slowing down each step, so Tim could analyze it and predict the upcoming attack. After they did that for a while, he slowed down defensive maneuvers, too, showing Tim a few effective means of blocking, dodging, and counterattacking. (Tim didn’t point out that he wasn’t likely to have a staff handy if he got jumped, or that the only time he’d been in real, actual danger lately, the man had had a gun.)

They hadn’t been moving quickly or running or anything, but it was still unfamiliar exercise, and Tim had worked up a sweat. Plus, he could feel it in his muscles as they walked back towards downtown. His arms were kinda noodly—to borrow a word from Dick—and there was a slight pull in his abdomen that he suspected meant he’d been working his core more than he was used to.

“When we get back we’ll do some more stretching,” Dick said.

It was like he could read Tim’s mind. Or maybe Tim was walking funny? He straightened his shoulders and made sure his strides were steady and even. He didn’t want Dick to get the wrong idea, or to think he was in pain. He wasn’t— or, if he was, it was good pain. The kind of pain he hoped he’d feel again, honestly. (And wasn’t that a weird thing to hope for.) But he wouldn’t get the chance if Dick didn’t think he could handle it.

“I’m good,” he said, as confidently as possible.

Dick huffed. “For now, sure, but trust me, you’re gonna want to stretch as much as possible. First, though: lunch. What are you in the mood for?”

“I don’t know,” Tim answered automatically. “What’s good?”

“The sushi place by my apartment is really good.”

“Shellfish allergy,” Tim reminded him.

“Right. Sorry, forgot about that,” said Dick.

“That’s okay,” Tim reassured him. “My parents always forget, too. They think I hate Chinese food, but it’s just that they always get dishes with shrimp, so I always make a peanut butter sandwich instead.”

Dick didn’t answer for a minute. Tim walked along beside him, humming tunelessly. Now that he was moving again, he was warming up— his arms felt almost clammy inside his jacket sleeves.

“Well,” Dick said finally. “Since you don’t actually hate Chinese, I know a good place around the corner. No shrimp, I promise.”

“Sounds great,” Tim replied. Then another thought occurred to him. “I can pay for it, since you got us breakfast.”

Dick’s head whipped so fast in his direction that for a second Tim honestly wondered if it hurt. “No— what?” said Dick. “Tim, you don’t have to do that.”

Tim shrugged. “I want to.”

“Well, too bad.”

“I can afford it.”

“So can I.”

“Yeah, obviously. But—”

“But what?”

But you’ve already done so much for me, Tim wanted to say, because it was true. Dick had listened to him, respected him, protected him when he needed it— when he didn’t even know he needed it. He’d let Tim stay up all night doing really cool detective work and even showed him a super-secret underground Batbase. He’d taught him

some fight moves, and didn't laugh when he geeked out over Nightwing's gear, and let him have access to the evidence Oracle had collected. In other words, Dick had been so much nicer and more generous that he'd had any right to be, especially when Tim was harbouring secrets about the case and about himself.

Before Tim had figured out what to say, Dick's arm landed on his shoulder, weighing him down slightly and pulling him along. "Come on. Let me spend Bruce's money. Save yours for something more fun."

Tim smiled and said, "Okay," but now he was thinking about money.

Specifically, he was thinking about the appointment he'd had with Mr. Rockwell earlier this week, and how his assistant had explained that they were tracking his time and drawing up an invoice. Tim had asked if he could see it, but she told him not to worry about it, reminding Tim that he wouldn't have to pay unless he withdrew the case before the hearing, or if he lost.

His heart started beating a little faster, the way it did every time he thought about this. What if he lost? What if he went to all this trouble —what if he ruined everything—and got nothing out of it?

And it *would* ruin everything. Bruce was going to find out. Mr. Rockwell had said Bruce wouldn't have to come to the hearing—something about how foster parents weren't legal guardians, which seemed weird to Tim—but sometimes foster parents wanted to, anyway. But even if Bruce didn't, he was going to find out sooner or later. Lillian would probably tell him, or Tim would have to bite the bullet and do it himself if and when he got a hearing date.

Would Bruce see it as a betrayal? Would he be angry? What would happen then, if Tim lost? Another foster home, he supposed. Bruce wouldn't want him around, he was sure. Tim would probably never see Dick again— except maybe once in a while as Bug, but the odds of that were slim. And on top of everything else, he'd have to pay a legal bill he wasn't completely sure he could afford.

Maybe it was for the best that Dick bought lunch, after all. But, Tim promised himself as they entered the restaurant, he'd find a way to pay Dick back. Somehow. Someday.

Dick slid into a booth. The red cushion of the bench let out some air through its many threadbare spots. Tim sat down opposite him, and the server, who'd been right on their heels the whole time, poured ice water into their glasses. Dick thanked him and picked up a menu. Tim

did the same, but movement in his peripheral vision caught his attention just a few seconds later.

He looked up to see a family of five approaching their table, heading towards a booth by the window. A girl, older than Tim, probably about seventeen—the oldest daughter, Tim assumed—glanced at them, dismissing Tim quickly to stare openly at Dick. Dick kept reading the menu like he didn't see her, but Tim could tell that he did.

"Ready to order?" said the server, startlingly loud and right next to Tim's left elbow. Tim jumped slightly and hoped nobody noticed.

Dick told him they were, then recited an order while Tim skimmed the menu desperately, trying to make sure he had an answer when it came time for his turn.

"And my brother's allergic to shellfish, so can you make sure—"

Tim didn't hear the rest of that sentence.

"Thank you," Dick was saying when the static faded. The server was taking the menu out of Tim's hands.

"Yeah, thanks," Tim echoed, but the server had already walked away.

Dick was saying something about fortune cookies. When he paused and lifted his glass to take a sip of his water, Tim heard his own voice speak as if from far away.

"Brother," it said.

Dick cocked his head. "What?"

Tim's lips were numb. "You told him that I was— that we were— are we?"

"Oh." Dick shrugged his shoulders. "I mean, yeah. Right? Close enough, anyway."

Tim thought back to one of his earliest nights in the manor, when he and Bruce had talked about going to Metropolis. That was the first time Bruce had mentioned Dick's name, the first time it had sunk in for Tim that living in Bruce Wayne's house meant being associated not just with the richest man in Gotham, but with The Wayne Family. He'd had complicated feelings about it ever since, but after meeting Dick he'd come to see him as a friend more than family. This

weekend, he'd been seeing Dick as an ally, a member of the same team. He realized now that that was kind of like having a brother.

A brother that he was lying to, his conscience reminded him unpleasantly. A brother that he was hiding things from. A brother that he might be leaving behind soon.

Tim. Are you sure? he heard Lillian ask.

He used to be. For more than a year now, he'd been sure. He was meant to be alone. That was why his parents were never around; it was a sign from the universe that he wasn't meant to have to rely on other people. He needed to go it alone, because he *could* go it alone. Because it was best for him to go it alone.

And, since the Garden Party, he'd been even more sure. He had to get out of Batman's house as soon as he could, for everyone's safety.

But Dick was looking at him across the table with concern in his blue eyes. Dick had offered him help and support and kindness without asking for anything in return. Dick had decided to be his ally the day he figured out Tim was Shutterbug. He had consciously and deliberately chosen to conceal Tim's identity from one of his closest allies— from the man who, for all intents and purposes, was his father.

"I'm not sure," Tim said finally. He didn't know whether he was answering Dick or speaking to the memory of his conversation with Lillian.

"That's okay," Dick said softly. "I know it's complicated."

Tim nodded, grateful for permission to let it lie. He reached for his glass and took a sip. They sat in silence for a moment before Dick changed the subject.

"So, how did my lesson stack up to Bruce's?" he asked.

"Well, it was a lot more fun," Tim admitted.

"Yes," Dick whispered, clenching his fist and pulling it towards him in a tiny act of celebration. Tim huffed a laugh.

"Still pretty advanced, though." Tim tried to explain it discreetly, since anyone could be listening. "It feels like doing things backwards, trying out new things before learning the basics."

Dick shrugged, unconcerned. “Sometimes doing things backwards is the only way to do them.”

“Of course *you’d* say that,” said Tim. “You probably learned how to walk on your hands before you could walk on your feet.”

“On a tightrope,” Dick said. Tim wasn’t sure if that was a correction or an addition. “Like you’re any different, though,” Dick went on. “Back handspring, remember?”

Tim’s face went warm, but he couldn’t argue.

“Which reminds me,” Dick added in a lower voice. “When you said you saw someone do one and it looked really cool, was that…?”

“No,” said Tim. It was a fight to keep a straight face. “I was watching the Olympics.”

Dick’s mouth twitched. “I know you’re lying, but just in case you’re not, my Olympics watch party is a very real thing, and you are very much invited.”

Tim blinked, losing the façade of indifference. “Really?”

“Of course,” said Dick. “Bruce has offered to get me tickets a few times, but I think I’d lose my mind if I was there in person. Plus, it’s hard to travel for long stretches, what with—” Their server reappeared, carrying a plate with two egg rolls— “family and all. Thank you.”

“Enjoy,” said the server, already heading to the next table.

Tim looked at the egg rolls and remembered that he didn’t have any idea what Dick had ordered for him. Dick distributed a plate and set of silverware to each of them—they were stacked against the wall, right by the soy and hot sauce bottles—then tipped one egg roll onto Tim’s plate before putting the other on his own.

“Oh, I didn’t order—” Tim started to say.

“Yes, you did. Or, I did. I got us the deluxe dinner for two,” Dick explained. “I wasn’t sure what you liked, but there’s a little bit of everything. No shrimp, though, obviously.”

“Thanks,” Tim said, touched.

“Of course,” Dick replied simply. He picked up his egg roll, but

quickly put it back down. “Fresh out of the fryer,” he muttered. “Guess that’s better than the alternative. Wouldn’t want them cold.”

Tim frowned at Dick’s inane commentary— not because it was annoying or anything, but because he played back part of their conversation and realized he knew why Dick was filling the silence.

“It wasn’t you,” he said, and Dick looked up. “I mean, it was. I saw you do cool things, but I was pretty young and didn’t get to see it often.” He paused, working up the courage. “Jason was the one that I watched more closely.”

Dick swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “I wondered,” he admitted.

Tim nodded. He hesitated again— was this too personal? But maybe Dick would want to know. “One time, I watched him practise a back handspring for... god, it must have been almost an hour. He just kept doing it over and over again. I couldn’t figure out why— it looked perfect to me every time, but I guess something felt off to him?”

Dick smiled faintly. His eyes were far away, and he didn’t speak.

“Or maybe I just couldn’t see how he was messing up,” Tim went on, aware that he was the one babbling now, filling the silence. “Like in the Olympics, you know? It all looks great, but then the commentators say they screwed it up, and you’re like, what? How? So, you know, maybe it was like that.”

Tim finally managed to close his mouth. He pressed his teeth together to keep it that way.

“Maybe,” Dick repeated softly, and he picked up the egg roll again.

“I took some pictures,” Tim added, after a desperate moment of wrestling with himself. He just wanted Dick to stop looking so sad right now.

It worked— Dick raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“When we get back to your place, I can show you,” Tim offered. “If— if you want.”

Dick’s smile was small and still, unfortunately, sad. “Maybe another time.”

“Okay,” Tim nodded.

The server interrupted the silence a moment later, setting dishes and plates of food between them. Tim and Dick both thanked him. Dick’s smile got a little bigger. Then, as he was doling out the fried rice, he asked Tim what he liked so much about Bernard, and Tim started breathing again.

Chapter 57

Chapter Summary

> Bruce lets Clark in on his latest findings about the LexCorp case—and other things.
>
> *“Somebody murdered them when they were already dying? That’s just evil.”*
>
> *Slowly, Bruce shook his head. “No. I don’t think so.”*
>
> *“You don’t think it’s evil?” said Clark, but he corrected himself a second later. “You don’t think they were dying.” Then he corrected himself again. “No, wait— you don’t think they were murdered?”*

Chapter Notes

> Happy birthday to me! I'm in my hobbit era, giving out gifts on my birthday (and eating several breakfasts). Please enjoy the return of Clark Kent!

He ducked. His attacker’s blade flickered down and to his right. He imagined he could feel the rush of air in its wake, cooling the sweat on his bare arms and neck. Before his attacker could raise the blade to try again, he drove his left arm down, striking just below the elbow, forcing their hand to open. The sword fell silently, vanishing before it hit the ground. He followed up with a series of quick punches to knock his disarmed opponent back, then delivered a solid kick to their abdomen. They stumbled, fell, and disappeared.

“Simulation complete,” said the Batcomputer.

Breathing hard, Bruce wiped sweat away from his eyes and crossed the mats to get to the console. He dismissed the prompt to restart the program and instead shut it down. Then he picked up his towel and water bottle and headed over to the computer desk. He checked the outside camera feeds but saw nothing. Clark’s message was still displayed on the central monitor, timestamped more than an hour ago.

Be there soon.

He sighed. *Soon,* when it came to Superman, usually meant anywhere between a third of a second and thirty minutes. Something must have

come up— an international crisis or natural disaster on the other side of the planet. But the news feeds running in the top right corner of the screen didn't feature any screaming headlines or promise footage of Superman doing his thing, and there had been no League alerts. So, whatever Clark was doing, it wasn't cape work, but it was apparently more important than the strategy session that Bruce had invited him to.

He drank some more water, then decided that he may as well get cleaned up and change while he was waiting. His clothes were sticky with sweat, his skin itchy and overheated, his hair plastered to his forehead.

Of *course* he'd just barely started the water running when he heard the Cave's entrance notification chime. (The Bat-doorbell, as Dick used to call it.) He sighed, spraying a fine mist. Clark had had his own codes for literally years at this point, but he was always too polite to go ahead and use them.

"Just come *in,* Clark," he said out loud, trusting that Clark would hear.

He didn't get a response, but the doorbell didn't ring again, either. Bruce carried on with his shower and didn't hurry; if it was urgent, Clark would have come to the locker room doorway and told him so.

Ten minutes later, he emerged in fresh clothes, his hair dripping into a towel at the base of his neck, and found Clark sitting at the computer desk. The files Barbara had found on Project Gemini—AKA the generator—were flickering by so fast it hurt Bruce's eyes to watch. So he turned his back on the screen and leaned against the desk next to Clark, facing out into the Cave.

"Interesting reading, isn't it?" he said.

"Fascinating," Clark agreed. "And worrying. This Substance X sounds dangerous. You have no idea what it is?"

"Not yet," said Bruce. "I can get Oracle to take another run at LexCorp's servers, but first I wanted to see if anyone in the League recognized it based on what we know so far."

"Offhand, I don't," said Clark, "but I can do a search at the Fortress. If nothing comes up there, Hal or J'onn might have an idea— assuming it's extraterrestrial, of course. Extradimensional... we'll see what Barry thinks?"

Bruce nodded, pleased to hear his own plan recited back to him. If he didn't know better, he'd think telepathy was one of Clark's powers.

"Want to get everybody together for a briefing tomorrow?" Clark asked.

"Not tomorrow."

"No?"

"Family dinner," Bruce explained. "And I'm not leading this, you are." Clark turned towards him in surprise, and Bruce shrugged. "Or Diana, take your pick."

Clark was staring. "You don't want to lead the Justice League's investigation into Substance X?" When Bruce shook his head, he added, "But it's the motive in your serial killer case. I would think you'd want to be hands-on, possibly bordering on obsessive. Are you feeling okay?"

Scowling, Bruce dodged Clark's outstretched hand, which was trying to touch his forehead. "Yes. That's why I don't want anything to do with this stuff. Didn't you read the January 5th report? And the victims' medical records?"

Clark's playful demeanour vanished at once. "Oh."

"Yeah. *Oh,"* Bruce repeated darkly. "If it's all the same to you, I'd rather let a non-human take charge on this one. You're slightly more invulnerable than I am."

"No, that's fair," said Clark. He cocked his head thoughtfully. "And surprisingly cognizant of your own abilities and limitations. Very un-reckless of you. Are you sure you're alright?"

Bruce rolled his eyes. "I'm fine, Clark. Sue me if I don't want to die of lung cancer."

"Is that—" Clark turned back to the computer screen. "Do you think that's what Dr. Rota had?"

"Tests and x-rays showed no tumours," Bruce said with a sigh. "But she clearly wasn't well, and neither was Siemens."

Clark hummed— a low, disapproving sound. "Somebody murdered them when they were already dying? That's just evil."

Slowly, Bruce shook his head. “No. I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think it’s evil?” said Clark, but he corrected himself a second later. “You don’t think they were dying.” Then he corrected himself again. “No, wait— you don’t think they were *murdered?”*

“I don’t know what I think,” Bruce confessed. “But what I *know* is that I’ve been treating this case as a homicide for months, and it’s gotten me nowhere. None of the evidence adds up to four willful acts of murder— not by a single perpetrator, not even by an organization like LexCorp or the Falcones. What I know is that there was an accident in the lab that released an unknown but measurably harmful substance into the air, and that four people breathed it in for approximately an hour. What I know is that, one by one, those four people died over the course of the next five months. What I know is that someone at LexCorp falsified employee records, muddying the waters and making it appear as if these four scientists had already walked away from the company before they died. And what I know is that Sebastian Cronin paid Don Falcone for unknown services rendered just months later.”

When Bruce ended his monologue, Clark let the silence hang for a few seconds. Then he said, “Well, isn’t this serendipitous.”

Bruce arched an eyebrow in his direction.

“The reason I was late today? I got the interview.”

Bruce pushed off the desk, his mood brightening. Clark had been trying to land an interview with Sebastian Cronin for weeks, hoping to exert a little journalistic pressure regarding the death of his predecessor— especially since Cronin was recently given the position permanently, rather than on an interim basis.

“That’s great news, Clark.”

“Yeah,” Clark agreed. “It sounds like LexCorp wants some good press about the permanent promotion. I had to sit down with some lawyers today and sign a *heck* of a lot of paperwork. Unfortunately, they gave me a list of questions I’m not allowed to ask, and almost everything about Dr. Rota is on it.”

“Hnn,” said Bruce. He set off towards the equipment bench.

“So, I’ll just have to get creative,” Clark called after him. “Maybe Lois can help.”

“Good thinking,” said Bruce. He opened a drawer and found what he was looking for. “Anything in the paperwork forbidding you from planting listening devices all over Cronin’s office?”

Clark huffed a laugh. “Would it matter if there was?”

“Suppose not,” Bruce admitted, bringing the handful of bugs back to the computer. “Move over, I’ll get these ready to go for you.”

Clark vacated the chair, and Bruce took his spot. Activating the listening devices was a simple, familiar task— it kept his hands busy more than anything as he spoke, laying out his new theory to Clark: that the scientists were doomed from the moment Substance X released a cloud of unknown particles in their lab on January 5th, and that, over the following months, LexCorp had orchestrated a conspiracy to bury this truth.

“So you think the accident killed them—albeit slowly—and the Falcones were just the cleaning crew,” Clark summarized.

“Given how little street chatter there’s been, it seems more likely than murder-for-hire,” said Bruce. “People talk about that kind of thing, as much as they know they shouldn’t. It’s…” He grimaced. “Glamorous, I guess. But burying a few bodies? That’s just a job. You don’t know these people, and you don’t care. You dig a hole— metaphorically in this case. Then you get paid, and you go home.”

“But the way that they cleaned this up wasn’t very clean, so to speak,” said Clark. “Making it look like the scientists were murdered guarantees police involvement.”

“An otherwise healthy person seeming to drop dead of natural causes would also be treated with suspicion,” Bruce pointed out.

“But less,” said Clark. “Wouldn’t there be fewer eyes on it? They’d be a blip in the news cycle, likely forgotten quickly.”

“Not if word got out that they were all working together at LexCorp on the same project,” Bruce countered.

“I suppose that’s a workers’ compensation lawsuit waiting to happen,” Clark admitted.

“Exactly,” Bruce agreed. “Next thing they know, LexCorp’s facing investigations into how safe their workplace is. Best case scenario, they’ve drawn eyes to the generator. Worst case—”

“Substance X.”

“Substance X.” Bruce half-spun in his chair and handed the bugs to Clark, who put them in his pocket. “The cover-up was absolute. Rota went to her doctor for weeks, asking for every test in the book, and nothing was found— probably because Substance X isn’t from around here. LexCorp knew—or suspected—that an autopsy wouldn’t turn up anything, but just in case, they paid for Falcone’s connections at the Blüdhaven County Coroner’s Office and Shady Pines Mortuary to take care of the bodies.”

“Diabolical,” Clark muttered.

“LexCorp didn’t leave anything to chance. Four scientists dead? They didn’t work for us anymore. Dead from what? Unfortunate crimes and accidents over in Gotham City.”

“Anything can happen in that hellhole,” Clark agreed.

Bruce knew he was playing along, but he glared anyway. *“I’m* allowed to say that. You’re not allowed to say that.”

Clark’s face turned red. “I was— no, it’s like— that’s what LexCorp—”

“Kidding,” Bruce reminded him, deadpan.

Clark glared back, but it didn’t last. It never did. “What does Dick think?” he asked, eyes on the screen again.

“He wasn’t able to get anything definitive from the coroner’s office or Shady Pines, unfortunately.”

“No, I meant about the LexCorp employee records,” Clark clarified, reaching over and pulling up the files in question. “How did he suspect they’d been forged?”

“I don’t know,” Bruce answered honestly. Oracle’s not-so subtle hint in the folder name, *Employee Records_Talk to Dick,* had been accompanied by a short note informing Bruce of Dick’s doubts about the credibility of the records that LexCorp had provided, and how that led to Barbara discovering the forgeries. But nothing explained Dick’s own line of thinking. “I was gonna call him tonight, after Tim’s in bed.”

“Alfred says they’re getting along?” Clark prompted. Bruce sent him a narrow-eyed look. “I wasn’t eavesdropping. Ma called. Told me he was visiting and why.”

Bruce relaxed and nodded. “Yeah, they’re getting along,” he agreed. “The trip to Blüdhaven was a surprise—”

“Nice euphemism for Dick telling you that he’s kidnapping Tim for the weekend.”

Bruce glared again. Clark raised his hands in surrender, unable to keep a straight face. “You know little old ladies love to gossip. And, yes, I mean Alfred.”

Bruce shook his head, but he was smiling, too. “It’s better than the alternative. After what happened in the training room yesterday, I was worried that Dick would want nothing to do with Tim anymore.”

Or me, he added silently. Clark seemed to hear it anyway and patted his shoulder.

“I’m glad they’re getting along,” he said. “Seems like Tim could use a friend.”

“Tim has lots of friends,” Bruce countered, defensive. “He even has a boyfriend. Or girlfriend. They-friend? I don’t know the word for it. They’re non-binary.”

“Cute,” said Clark. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to imply that your kid has no friends. I just meant, he seems... lonely? And a lot older than fifteen.”

“Yeah,” Bruce agreed heavily. “He’s been on his own for a long time.”

Clark nodded. After a moment, he asked, “What did your lawyer say?”

“Termination or surrender of parental rights has to happen first,” Bruce answered, as matter-of-fact as his lawyer had put it to him.

“And how is that going?”

Bruce thought back to that Sunday morning a week ago. After his flashbacks had faded, he was restless. He went for a drive, but that was almost worse. He needed to move. So he parked the car at Wayne Tower and walked. Eventually, he passed a bakery that smelled heavenly and wandered inside. Over a cup of espresso—and ignoring the whispers from the staff behind the counter who’d recognized him —he watched the sun climb the backs of the skyscrapers. He thought about his flashbacks, Tim’s nightmares. He thought about Tim soothing himself because he was sure no one else would do it. He realized he was hoping that Tim would never have to do that again.

Then he pulled his phone out of his pocket and sent Lillian an email. She replied less than twenty minutes later, despite the fact that it was barely nine on a Sunday. He got three Danishes in a to-go box and walked back to the Tower. He called his lawyer from the car.

Bruce sighed. “I thought it was going okay, but now... I don’t know.”

“Why?”

“Lillian told Tim about the State’s decision to petition for the termination of his parents’ parental rights,” Bruce explained, “but she said they didn’t get around to talking about adoption. She wouldn’t tell me why at first, but finally when I talked to her on Tuesday she said Tim needed a little time to process the news, and that I shouldn’t bring it up for the moment.”

Clark nodded. “That makes sense, I guess.”

“I guess,” Bruce agreed, but he was frowning. “I wouldn’t be so worried if he hadn’t skipped school on Wednesday and lied right to my face about it.”

“Can’t get him to open up, huh?”

Bruce shook his head. “He’s a little too good at keeping secrets.”

After a beat, Clark asked, “Do I have to say the thing about pots and kettles, or are you already there?”

Bruce huffed a laugh. “No need, trust me.”

“He’ll come around,” Clark assured him. “Like you said, he’s been on his own for a long time. Once he sees that you’re not going anywhere —”

“His parents aren’t going to make it easy,” Bruce interrupted. He got to his feet. Feeling the need to move again, he paced. “Given how much they’ve resisted the process since day one, there’s no way they’re going to surrender their parental rights now. Not without a fight.”

Clark watched him with worried eyes.

“Which is maddening,” Bruce went on. “As far as I can tell, they’ve never cared whether or not their son was in their life. If they do, they haven’t been acting like it. They’ve had dozens of chances— which

never would have happened if they weren't white and wealthy, by the way. They had *one* visit with Tim, and it was after he came here. And from the sounds of it, Jack spent most of that visit bitching about me."

"And then there was the Garden Party."

"The only good thing to come of that is that it gave the State a push. They're finally doing something, making the Drakes face some kind of consequences for neglecting their kid so much that he—"

Bruce broke off, wondering how best to explain what he'd discovered last night.

"That he has such a hard time trusting anyone," Clark finished the sentence for him.

"No," said Bruce, then he corrected himself. "Well, yes, obviously. But that's not all. I recently... you know how I have a stalker?"

Clark frowned. "No. What stalker?"

"The photographer with the blog."

"Oh, you mean the batarazzi. What about them?"

Bruce just looked at him. After a moment, Clark's eyes went wide. "No."

"Yes."

"Are you— how sure are you?"

"Completely. The evidence is irrefutable."

He walked Clark through the superficial things he'd noticed about the pictures last night, and the more detailed features—the ones that proved the photos had been taken with the same camera and same lens—that he'd discovered around sunrise, when he woke from a short sleep convinced that it couldn't be true, that he must have made a mistake, that his foster son hadn't been chasing Batman for years without his knowledge.

When he was done, Clark sat down on the edge of the computer desk. "Well," he said. "Isn't that something?"

"Yeah," said Bruce, the syllable bitter on his tongue. "Tim's been wandering around the city at night, following me, for years. *That's*

how negligent his parents have been."

Clark blew out a long breath. "Unfortunately, you can't bring that to the State as evidence."

Bruce didn't say this, but the same thought had occurred to him. Since last night, one corner of his mind had been quietly chugging away, working the problem while he focused on LexCorp. If there was a way Batman could intervene in the Drakes' custody case, it would be very risky— and not just to Bruce or Batman. If Tim's identity as the owner of the bat blog were to leak to the public, Tim could be dragged into a much bigger mess through no fault of his own. Whether he knew it or not, Tim had knowledge about Batman that few did. That knowledge was valuable to certain people— and that made it dangerous.

"So, what are you gonna do?" Clark asked, breaking Bruce out of his thoughts.

"Not sure if I can stop him," Bruce admitted. "He's fifteen. He already wants to stay out at night. He'll be driving soon. And if I try to keep him home even more, he'll just resort to sneaking out, like he did at every other foster home he's stayed at so far."

Clark hummed thoughtfully.

"I know he can do it. He can get around the manor's security, because he's done it already, and if I force his hand it's only a matter of time until he finds a way into my *other* systems. And if he gets that far, well —"

"At that point you may as well have told him everything."

"Exactly."

"It's a pickle, alright," said Clark. Bruce rolled his eyes at the expression, and Clark didn't seem to notice, pushing himself off the desk. "Well, I should get back. I'll take this intel to the League. Diana and I will decide who's gonna take it, but it'll probably be me. Metropolis is my turf, after all, and knowing Luthor, Substance X probably has something to do with me."

"Wow, what an ego," Bruce commented dryly. It was Clark's turn to roll his eyes. "Plus, you still owe her for that wizard a few months back," Bruce added

Clark groaned. "Right. I won't even bother to ask, then. This one's all

mine."

Bruce nodded. "Team briefing on Monday or Tuesday?"

"Tuesday's my interview with Cronin, so maybe Wednesday? That way I can update everyone with anything else I find out."

"Sounds good." Bruce followed Clark towards the exit. When they got there, he keyed open the door, but Clark hesitated before leaving.

"You know, there is a different way you could approach Tim's batarazzi habit," he said.

He seemed cautious, like he feared Bruce would tell him to butt out, so Bruce said, "Oh?"

Relieved, Clark went on. "Well, Tim's clearly getting something out of sneaking around, following Batman. There's a reason he's doing it. It's... satisfying to him, I guess, in a way."

"Right," Bruce said, not sure where he was going with this.

"So what if, instead of trying to stop him, you figured out what he's getting out of it? Then you could replace that with something else. Something less dangerous."

"You mean re-direct his energy." With an all-but audible *thunk,* Bruce's brain clicked the pieces together. He sighed and closed his eyes briefly. "Like I did with Dick. And Jason."

When he re-opened his eyes, he saw Clark fighting back a smile. "You really didn't think of that?"

"It's been a long week," Bruce muttered, and Clark laughed.

They said their goodbyes, and then, faster than Bruce could blink, Clark disappeared.

Bruce closed and locked the door behind him, then made his way back into the central part of the Cave. He passed the Batcomputer without even looking at it, slowly climbing the stairs up to his silent study. He headed down to the kitchen and put the kettle on, checking his phone while he waited. There were, as always, a dozen or more new messages in his WE inbox. He ignored them for the moment and instead opened his text conversation with Dick.

Checking in. All good? he typed.

The message changed to ‘read’ in less than a second, then Dick sent a thumbs-up emoji back.

Thank you, Bruce replied. *Call you later.*

Another thumbs-up.

The kettle whistled. Bruce made his tea and stood by the terrace door, looking out at the soft rain that was falling. It was nothing like last night’s storm, but dark and gloomy nonetheless.

He’d have to give some thought as to how he’d re-direct the batarazzi. He’d already done it once— though, of course, he hadn’t realized who he’d been dealing with when he set Tim the task of improving the manor’s security system. (He should have, but he couldn’t go back. Only forward.) Tim liked playing with electronics, so Bruce had set him a productive task. Tim also liked taking photographs of Batman and posting them online; there was surely something productive he could do with this as well. Bruce just didn’t know what, yet. Hopefully he’d have some time before the Bat and the batarazzi met, so he could figure it out.

In his pocket, his phone buzzed. He pulled it out to see yet another message had landed in his WE inbox. He sighed and climbed the stairs back up to the study. It was time to face his most dreaded foe: work email.

Most of the messages, thankfully, were FYIs, or they only required a quick signature— he was able to clear a lot of those before he finished his tea. But one about halfway down had arrived at 16:55 on Friday and was marked ‘urgent’.

GUEST LIST REVIEW - WE Masquerade Ball 10/29

“Right,” he said under his breath. With everything that had happened in the last couple of days, he forgot that he’d asked the head of BD Outreach to get him the guest list for the next WE event, so he could review it over the weekend and guarantee that the Drakes—or anyone closely affiliated with them—were not on it, just in case Tim wanted to make an appearance.

He took a deep breath and opened the spreadsheet.

Chapter 58

Chapter Summary

> Nightwing orders Bug to stay home. Oracle and Tim have a conversation.
>
> *“How do you know my real name?”*
>
> *“Please,” Oracle scoffed lightly.*

Chapter Notes

> Visual references for the ri-Dick-ulous yoga poses can be found in the endnote.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Let’s do some yoga, Dick had said. *Could be fun,* Dick had said.

Beside him, Dick arched his spine into a perfect semicircle. Tim’s spine imitated the coffee table they’d shoved aside to make room.

Facing each other, Dick sat cross-legged on the mat and pulled one foot up behind his head. Tim sat cross-legged on the mat and barely managed to pull his shoulders out of their permanent laptop slouch.

Mid-lunge, Dick folded one leg in front of his, laid his back leg flat somehow, then bent that knee, put his foot in the crook of his elbow, and clasped his hands behind and to the side of his head. Tim... didn’t do any of that.

“That is *not* normal,” he said.

“It’s normal for me,” Dick countered, letting go of the hold and stretching his legs out behind him like a flattened corgi.

“Then *you’re* not normal,” Tim concluded.

“And your insults are not very original,” Dick shot back. “Apparently, I’m gonna have to train you in that, too.”

“In what, insults?” Dick nodded quickly before pulling his other leg forward to start his complicated pose all over again. Tim switched his lunging leg. “You got a special gym for that?”

“Not a bad idea. I’ll get Bruce to make a simulation on the Batcomputer.” Tim laughed, but Dick went on. “You can run around Gotham practising on computer-programmed rogues.”

Tim just shook his head. Dick untwisted into Flat Corgi again, but only for a second before resting his forearms on either side of his head and curling in on himself. (Pillbug pose? Tim had no idea.) Then he straightened his legs, pushing his butt up to make an inverted ‘V’ and letting his forearms take more and more of his weight until his feet came off the ground entirely.

“You don’t talk to many rogues, do you, Tim?” Dick asked, once he was fully upside down.

“Uh, no,” Tim answered. He didn’t want to distract Dick in case he fell, but Dick didn’t seem concerned. In fact, he bent his neck to look at his joined hands, and there wasn’t even a slight waver in his balance. “Catwoman’s said hello once or twice. Riddler yelled at me to get off his balcony one time, but that was an accident. I swear, I didn’t know it was his hideout when I climbed up there.”

“Lucky,” Dick remarked, lowering his legs gracefully to the ground—or, as gracefully as possible given that his shorts were highlighter yellow and his leggings and tank top were black. He looked like a neon bumblebee.

He curled back into Pillbug, then moved and sat on his knees facing Tim. He gestured for Tim, still lunging, to do the same, and Tim did. He’d kind of forgotten that he was supposed to be stretching, too.

“I guess what I meant was, have you gotten information from the rogues?” Dick said. He again arched his back, reaching behind him to rest his hands on his calves. Tim tried to follow suit and had to throw out a hand for balance when he nearly toppled backwards.

“No,” he said again, once he’d recovered. “I’ve never gotten intel from any of the big players in Gotham. Or the small players, either, I guess. I kinda don’t talk to anybody, and nobody really talks to me.”

“Hm,” said Dick nonchalantly, and Tim realized his mistake. He’d almost grown accustomed to Bruce’s interrogations disguised as conversations, but Dick seemed able to sneak past his defences more easily.

“I overhear things, though,” he sort-of-didn’t lie. “Sometimes.”

Dick hummed again but didn't press the issue. Instead, he got to his feet and swung his arms up in a sun salutation. Tim did the same and savoured the stretch.

After two repetitions, Dick said, "I've got to patrol tonight. I shouldn't be gone for more than a few hours— just need to check in on some active cases and generally make myself visible. Will you be okay by yourself?"

Tim folded forward, exhaling in a short huff as he reached to touch his toes. "Dick, I used to be home alone for weeks at a time."

He stretched back up, but Dick didn't follow. Tim turned to watch as, still bent forward, Dick put his hands behind his feet, folded himself completely in half, put all his weight on his hands, then lifted his toes off the ground and pointed them towards the ceiling.

"Well, that's upsetting," he said, once he was in position.

"The pose? Yeah, it is," said Tim. "How are you *doing* that?"

"Not the pose," Dick said. He shut his eyes, stayed where he was for a few breaths longer, then unfolded and got back on his feet just in time to join Tim for another trip up to salute the sun. "The home-alone-for-weeks-at-a-time thing."

"Oh. I'll be fine," Tim said, uncomfortable. He let his arms drop to his sides.

"I know you will be," said Dick, doing the same. He stepped in front of Tim and looked him straight in the eye. "You're not going to follow me."

Was that an order or an observation, Tim wondered. Dick clarified while he was still trying to figure it out.

"I don't want you to follow me," he said. "I don't want you sneaking around Blüdhaven by yourself. It's dangerous. Even more dangerous than Gotham in some places, and you don't know your way around the city."

Tim scowled. "I know some—"

"This is not up for debate," Dick cut him off. "Blüdhaven isn't Metropolis on a sunny Sunday morning. And if I think there's even a chance that you're out there, I'm going to get worried and distracted.

And distractions can literally be deadly in my line of work. Do you understand?"

Tim considered this and nodded. "I understand."

"So you'll stay put," Dick insisted. It wasn't a question.

"I'll stay put," said Tim. He even mostly meant it.

Two hours later, he was staring out the patio doors at Dick's glittering city. It really was a lot prettier at night.

At his feet was his backpack. Inside it was his camera case and a folded piece of paper— an actual map. His shoes were on his feet, the laces double-knotted. His phone, fully charged, was in his pocket.

He wasn't going to go far. Just down the block. Barely past the sushi restaurant that Dick had suggested before remembering Tim's allergy. There was a church there— an old gothic thing, with bells and statues and stained-glass windows that were taller than him. The website said there was a special midnight concert tonight; it would be full and well-lit. A light rain was falling. Under the streetlights, with the right lens and filter, it could look like an oil painting.

He'd only be gone for half an hour. Forty-five minutes at most. Just long enough to take a few shots, and then he'd come back. He'd be fine. He'd be careful. Dick probably wouldn't even know—

In his pocket, his phone rang. He pulled it out. The caller ID read *Dick Grayson.*

"Eerie," he murmured, but then he frowned. He was sure Dick had said he always left his civilian phone at home when he went out on patrol— because of the location tracking. So...?

He answered. "Hello? Dick?"

"Hello, Tim Drake," said a woman— not Dick. Tim's heart sped up.

"Who is this? How do you have Dick's phone?"

"I don't," the woman answered. "I spoofed the number so you'd answer."

"Who is this?" Tim repeated, but the woman kept talking.

“Actually, do me a favour and dig his phone out of the couch cushions? Dick won’t remember that he left it there tomorrow morning, and he’ll tear the place apart looking—”

“Oracle?” Tim interrupted.

She laughed. “Gold star, Shutterbug,” she said, and Tim felt a wave of relief.

It was short-lived, however. An ice cube slid down his spine as he remembered how she’d addressed him a moment ago. “How do you know my real name?”

“Please,” Oracle scoffed lightly. “It wasn’t hard to guess how you were connected. Tonight I asked Bruce a quick, casual question about where you were this weekend, and that confirmed it.”

Tim gulped. It didn’t seem to stop his throat from drying out. “Does he — did you tell him—?”

“Of course not,” said Oracle. “Dick brought you into this, not me. It’s his mess to clean up when Bruce inevitably, eventually figures it out.”

Relieved again, Tim said, “Okay. Thank you.”

“Mhm. He *will* figure it out, you know,” Oracle stressed. “Frankly, I’m surprised he hasn’t yet.”

Me too, Tim didn’t say.

“But then again, I suppose you’ve been keeping a pretty low profile, and one doesn’t usually associate teenagers with police informants.” Oracle paused. “Bloggers, on the other hand...”

Tim went perfectly still. Like that would help.

“Dick doesn’t know that part, does he?”

Tim blew out a shaky breath. “I— I don’t think so.”

“Well, don’t worry. I’m not gonna tell him. Not before my dad wins the bet, anyway.”

Tim blinked. *Her dad? What bet?*

“I’d love to be a fly on the wall for that conversation,” she sighed. “He’s never gonna let Batman live it down. As he shouldn’t.”

“Um,” Tim finally managed to say. “What are you— who’s your dad?”

Oracle laughed again— a small, tinkling sound through the phone. “I suppose it’s only fair,” she said. “I know your secrets, you should know some of mine. My name is Barbara Gordon.” She paused again. “I used to be Batgirl.”

Tim sat down abruptly on the couch— on Dick’s phone, to be exact. He pulled it out from under his butt and set it on the coffee table.

“A lot of people think Batgirl died,” he said numbly.

Oracle hummed. “For a little while there, I almost wished I had.”

A heavy silence followed. Tim reviewed what he knew about Barbara Gordon. It wasn’t much. As he was a public figure, Commissioner Gordon’s family was sometimes in the news. Barbara’s car accident definitely made the front page: a tragic hit and run by a drunk driver. She’d been left a paraplegic, and the other driver had never been caught, if Tim recalled the story correctly. Tim wondered what had really happened— if it had anything to do with Batman. He wondered if she would tell him.

“But now I help Batman in other ways,” Barbara said, more brightly. “Not unlike you, actually.”

Tim squirmed on the couch, unsure of what to say.

“I’ve been following your career with some interest since day one,” she told him. “You have a real gift— both for photography and just general nosiness. You’d make a great P.I. in a few years, assuming Dick and Bruce don’t already have other plans for you.”

Robin material, Tim heard Dick say again, and his heart fluttered in his chest with something like hope.

He squashed it ruthlessly, the same way he had every other time he remembered his conversation with Dick yesterday. Because it wasn’t going to happen. As soon as he was out of Bruce’s house, or when Bruce figured this all out—whichever came first—there was no way he would offer the cape to Tim, no matter what Dick had to say about it.

Besides, for all that Tim admired Dick and Jason, he had never really wanted to *be* them. (Did he?)

“I wasn’t lying last night,” Barbara continued, oblivious to Tim’s inner

turmoil. “I have serious respect for the way you took over my dad’s computer to get him those pictures of the Maroni hit.”

“Thank you,” Tim murmured.

“Did you know Batman got me to set a trap in the GCPD network after that?”

Tim’s eyebrows shot up. “What?”

“Yeah. He was really hoping you’d try again, but I suspected you were too smart to fall for it.”

“Oh.”

“Unless, of course, you managed to find your way around it?”

“You say that like you really think I could,” said Tim, and Barbara made a *so-so* noise. “No,” Tim reiterated. “I’ve been in and out of the GCPD’s servers a few times, but I’ve never tried to take remote control again. I didn’t want to push my luck.”

“Smart,” said Barbara. Tim felt his cheeks go warm. “Well. Now that we’ve gotten to know each other a little better, I was hoping you could help me.”

“With what?” Tim asked apprehensively.

“Batman asked me to dig into Dunbar Holdings, and I thought you might like to help.”

Tim blinked, caught off-guard again. How many times could that happen in one conversation, he wondered. “Dunbar Holdings— the company that LexCorp is making the generator for?”

“That’s the one.”

“You want me to help you research it?”

“I do.”

“Um,” said Tim. “Why?”

“Two heads are better than one,” Barbara replied, still casual and friendly, like they were discussing which movie they wanted to see. “And since you’re the one who overheard some kind of conversation about the generator, there might be something that sparks for you that

I would miss."

Tim thought again about how the information he was withholding might slot into place in the larger investigation. It was like putting together a puzzle while keeping some pieces in his pocket. Also, he didn't know what the finished picture was supposed to look like. If he did, he could work backwards to—

Sometimes doing things backwards is the only way to do them.

"Yeah," he said, even as his mind was racing ahead to the next steps. "Yeah, I'll work it from my end and let you know what I find."

"Great," said Barbara, and it sounded sincere. "I'll be in touch again soon."

Tim didn't bother to ask how; he was quickly learning that Oracle had her methods.

"Oh, and one more thing, Bug," she added.

"Yeah?"

"Do as Nightwing says. Stay put tonight."

Tim glanced around the apartment nervously. "Were you listening to our conversation? Can you see me right now?"

Barbara laughed. "No. But you're you. I don't need surveillance equipment to guess what you were thinking."

Tim scowled. He didn't love the thought that he was so predictable, but Barbara spoke again before he could comment on it.

"Nightwing isn't watching you, either," she said, "but this *is* a test. He's trusting you to listen to him. To trust him. If you screw this up, it won't end well for you."

Tim let out a long breath. "Okay," he said, resigned. "I'll stay put."

"Good call," said Barbara. "Talk to you soon, Bug."

The phone beeped before he could say goodbye. He pulled it away from his ear just in time to see the call interface vanish. Out of curiosity, he navigated to the call log. Sure enough, there was nothing there.

He huffed a laugh, got off the couch, and carried his shoes back to the front closet. He didn't even look out the patio doors as he picked up his backpack. He put it away in the spare bedroom, then returned to the living room and opened his laptop.

"Backwards," he muttered, as he began to follow the familiar protocols that would make himself invisible online.

He knew his parents had something to do with the generator. His mother had said that Drake Industries had signed an agreement, and his father had acted like he was entitled to an update about the project. Therefore, they were involved. But the records from LexCorp showed no connection to Drake Industries, and Tim didn't know why.

It didn't make any sense... or maybe it just didn't make sense when he looked it from LexCorp's side— when he looked at it forwards. Maybe, to get the bottom of this, he had to work backwards.

He was going to hack Drake Industries.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Visual references for Dick's insane yoga poses can be found at this website: https://veryfitlife.com/15-hard-yoga-poses-you-need-to-try-with-simple-steps/. I do not vouch for the credibility of this website or any of the poses therein; I chose it because it has GIFs instead of still images showing the steps to get into and out of the poses.

In order of appearance, Dick does:

#6 "Wheel Pose"

#12 "Compass Pose"

#1 "One-Legged King Pigeon Pose"

#5 "Forearm Stand"

#13 "Firefly Pose"

This should go without saying, but don't try these at home, kids!

Chapter 59

Chapter Summary

Dick comes back from patrol to find Tim exactly where he left him. Bruce calls to update him on the case.

“Just checking in. How are things? How’s Tim?”

“Good and good,” Dick answered.

“Did he go to bed okay?”

“Yep,” Dick lied, watching Tim review the Bat-tablet on the couch in his peripheral vision.

Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone! With apologies for the short notice, I will be taking a hiatus after today's chapter. I should be back in 4-6 weeks— I just need a little time to get ahead on the next chapters. We really are in the home stretch now, which is super exciting and also kind of terrifying! Thank you all for reading along with me on this journey, and I'll see you soon!

Dick found Tim exactly where he left him: on the couch, on his laptop. Dick tried not to be surprised by that, but he was. From the way Bruce talked, Tim was worse than a feral cat; he needed constant surveillance and probably a bell around his neck for good measure.

Dick had pinged Barbara just before he left, asking her to keep an eye on the outdoor security cams at his building and in his neighbourhood. He’d been on edge for the first hour of his patrol, certain that she was going to interrupt at any moment to tell him that Tim had escaped, but she didn’t, and eventually he relaxed and let himself fall into the groove. He stopped a bank robbery seconds after it began, walked a pizzeria employee home when she flagged him down to tell him about a possible stalker—he’d be keeping an eye on that place, and on her, for the next few weeks just in case—and broke up a small scuffle on the edge of the river that marked a border between two of Blüdhaven’s criminal organizations.

Then, on a whim and because he was in the area, he swung by the coroner’s office to see if his new favourite diener was working. She

was, and she was happy to let him take another look at the autopsy reports for the LexCorp Four. She'd attended two of them personally, so he asked if she'd noticed any signs typical of a respiratory disease. She thought about it for a moment and said yes, then dug a voice recorder out of a drawer.

"My boss told me to delete these notes," she said, handing it to him, "but I never got around to it."

"Then I guess it's my lucky day," Nightwing commented. The diener—Maggie, she said he could call her Maggie—beamed.

"I thought it was strange that he wasn't commenting on the signs of respiratory illness," she went on, "but I didn't know these people. I didn't have any records from when they were alive."

"Does your boss have those records?"

"Dunno." Maggie pushed her silver-framed glasses up, and her white lab coat slipped down. Despite the cold temperature in the room, she was wearing a sleeveless purple blouse underneath, and her shoulder was surprisingly toned. "If he did, he probably doesn't now. Not since that guy came around two weeks ago and slipped him a few hundred dollars."

Nightwing's focus snapped back to Maggie's face. "What guy?"

She shrugged. The coat fell a little further, revealing more of her dark brown skin. Her blouse was a v-neck, and she was wearing a push-up bra. "Just some guy."

"Can you describe him?" Nightwing pressed. "Do you have video footage?"

"I only saw him from behind, so no," Maggie replied, "but unless he was a ghost, he'd be on the cameras. Not like our security guy ever checks them."

"Where's your security office?" asked Nightwing.

Maggie stared at him a second longer, then sighed and pulled her lab coat back up. "This way," she said, turning on her heel.

Twenty minutes later, he had three weeks of footage from the coroner's office surveillance system stored on a flash drive. He pinged Babs again to see if she could hack the CCTV and get anything further,

then set out for home.

Tim looked up in surprise when Dick opened the front door, his suit and weapons in the duffle bag that he had slung over one shoulder. In his other hand, he had a paper bag with a couple of shawarma wraps and a dish of rice topped with hummus and hot sauce.

“Oh,” Tim said. “I expected you to come in through the window.”

“Only when I’m really tired,” Dick replied. “Mostly it’s smarter to change in a safehouse far from home and come back by the main door in civvies.”

“That makes sense,” said Tim, nodding. “Which reminds me: how do you guys make sure no one follows the Batmobile back to the Cave?”

This was not a question Dick expected at 12:49AM. “We take the back roads?”

Tim frowned. “That doesn’t sound viable in the long term.”

Dick blinked, then huffed a laugh. “Take it up with Bruce.” He raised the paper bag. “You like shawarma?”

The shawarma wraps were long gone, but Dick was still picking away at the rice with a plastic spoon half an hour later while he typed up notes to summarize the night’s patrol. He would file them on the Batcomputer tomorrow, since he was supposed to have stayed home tonight to keep an eye on Tim, but he didn’t want to forget any of the details that Maggie had shared.

Suddenly, a comm ping lit up the corner of his screen. “Shit,” he said softly.

“What?” Tim asked from the couch.

“It’s Bruce,” Dick explained. “Or, more accurately, Batman. I gotta call him.”

Tim stood up. “Okay, I’ll leave.”

Dick waved him down again. “You’re good,” he said, picking up his earpiece. “Just don’t say anything.”

Tim didn’t sit, eyes darting back forth between Dick and the bedroom hallway. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. We won’t be on speaker or video.” Dick turned to face Tim directly. “Don’t worry, okay? It’ll be fine.”

Tim didn’t seem convinced, but he did sit—more accurately, he perched—on the couch cushion again. Dick put his earpiece in and tapped it to activate the shared frequency. Bruce picked up almost immediately.

“Hey, B,” Dick greeted him in a low voice, like he would if there was somebody sleeping in the other room. “What’s up?”

“Just checking in,” replied Bruce. Dick could tell from the lack of ambient city noise that he was back in the Cave. “How are things? How’s Tim?”

“Good and good,” Dick answered.

“Did he go to bed okay?”

“Yep,” Dick lied, watching Tim review the Bat-tablet on the couch in his peripheral vision.

“On time?”

“Not a minute past 11, just like you said.” Dick half-turned his head and noticed Tim’s eyes weren’t moving. He was sitting as still as a statue.

“And did you check that he’s actually sleeping?”

“Not in the last hour,” Dick replied, turning back to the computer screen, “but I haven’t heard a sound, so—”

“So maybe you should check in another hour,” Bruce advised.

“Okay,” said Dick quickly, realizing he wasn’t going to win this. “I’ll double-check once we’re done here.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem.” Dick waited, but Bruce didn’t tell him what he wanted. “So, was that all, or…?”

“No,” Bruce replied. “I’ve been working my way through the files that Oracle sent. I understand that the two of you spent a lot of time on the personnel records last night?”

“Yeah, we did, after Tim went to bed,” said Dick. He hated the way he felt himself tense up. Babs had promised to keep the whole Bug thing quiet, and he trusted her, but there was a small part of him that worried that she’d spilled the beans.

“Barbara didn’t specify what made you suspect the records were forged in the first place,” Bruce said, and Dick’s heart beat a little faster. “Aside from looking into the coroner and the funeral home, I wasn’t aware you were actively working on this case.”

It was a statement of fact, not an accusation, Dick reminded himself. He just had to respond as such.

“I wasn’t,” he said truthfully. “But I started thinking about it, and something just didn’t add up, you know?”

There was a pause, then Bruce said, “I agree.”

You do? Dick didn’t say.

“The longer this case has gone on, the more convenient it’s seemed that three of the four victims were ex-employees by the time they died,” Bruce continued.

Trying to keep the relief from his voice, Dick said, “Yeah. Not to mention that the team’s death wouldn’t have as much impact if none of them were working on the generator anymore.”

“Right,” Bruce agreed. “I saw the additional medical records that you requested Oracle acquire from the LexCorp clinic. Good eyes, spotting that pattern so quickly.”

Dick glanced at Tim, who was still looking at the Bat-tablet but very clearly not seeing it. “Was that a compliment, B? Don’t strain yourself now.”

“Forget I said anything.”

Dick laughed softly, and Tim seemed to relax in his peripheral vision.

“Did you take a look at any of the project files?” Bruce asked.

“No, I haven’t made it that far yet,” Dick admitted. “I was focusing on the team.”

“No problem. The pattern of sick days that you and Oracle found— it starts on January 5th, right?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Because the project files contain detailed reports of an accident in the lab that happened the same day.”

“Really?” Dick’s eyes went to Tim again.

This time Tim looked up. *What?* he mouthed.

“An accident in the lab?” Dick repeated for his benefit. “What kind of accident?”

Bruce talked for the next several minutes, explaining how the generator malfunctioned on January 5th and released some kind of gas that the scientists breathed in.

“That might explain the respiratory symptoms that Siemens and Rota reported,” Dick mused.

“My thoughts exactly. And since Substance X is possibly extraterrestrial in origin—”

“Uh,” Dick interrupted. “Wait, back up a bit. Did you just say the generator runs on gunk from another planet?”

Over on the couch, Tim’s eyes were *huge*.

“Possibly,” Bruce repeated. “It’s also possible that it came from an alternate dimension.”

“That’s not much better, B,” Dick felt obligated to point out.

“I know. I’ve got the Justice League looking into Substance X and how LexCorp acquired it. Superman was here today. He’s taking charge of that part of the investigation.”

“Whoa,” said Dick, genuinely surprised. “Bringing in the big guns, huh?”

“Given how dangerous this stuff seems to be, I think it’s warranted,” Bruce said.

“Can’t say I disagree,” Dick conceded, “but I’m surprised you’re okay with being hands-off, given that it’s *your* quadruple homicide.”

Bruce made a noise— a combination *hmph* and *grr* that made him sound like a confused koala. “Clark said something similar.”

Dick grinned. “Well, I’ve always said Superman and I have a lot in common.”

“What,” he heard Tim whisper, and he had to fight back laughter while shushing him with one hand.

“Be that as it may,” Bruce said, and Dick could hear him rolling his eyes, “I also think it’s possible that we’re not dealing with a homicide at all.”

Dick’s smile fell off his face as he let his hand flop down to his side. “Wait, what? Are you being serious?”

“I’m being *so* serious,” Bruce repeated, dry as a desert. “I’m starting to think it’s more likely that we’re dealing with a conspiracy to cover up four accidental deaths rather than four intentional homicides.”

Dick blinked, processing this. Sure, he’d told Tim that he would try to find something that would independently verify the information his anonymous source had given him, but he hadn’t been convinced that he would. And he *really* hadn’t thought that Bruce would draw the same conclusion that Tim had, but from a completely different set of data.

His eyes once again landed on Tim. “You think they died as a result of the lab accident, rather than being murdered?”

Tim sat up straighter. His expression was a mix of terror and excitement.

“I think it’s a possibility,” Bruce confirmed.

Dick shifted in his computer chair, but it wasn’t enough movement. He stood and began to pace.

“Devil’s advocate,” he said a moment later, and Bruce gave him his *I’m listening* grunt. “How do you explain why they died at different times? Or in different places?”

“Each of them was exposed to a slightly different concentration of unknown particulate matter,” Bruce answered promptly. “Hiss was hit with the highest dose, Rota the lowest. Hiss died less than four weeks after the initial exposure; Rota died more than five months later.”

“So you think it’s like radiation,” Dick concluded.

“It would make sense.”

“Okay,” Dick acknowledged, “but don’t you think it’s possible that LexCorp arranged to have the scientists murdered to keep them from speaking out about the accident?”

“Possible? Yes,” said Bruce, in a patient, teaching tone that Dick hadn’t heard for quite a while. “Likely? No.”

He launched into another explanation, this time about the lack of street chatter regarding the Falcones fulfilling four contracts. Dick could see where he was coming from, but he didn’t hesitate to tell Bruce that he was still skeptical.

“So, Falcone’s fixers followed the four scientists— whoa, try saying that ten times fast,” he interrupted himself. “Uh. Anyway. You think they wandered around after the scientists, waiting for them to drop dead, so they could clean up the mess? How would they even know when it would happen? Was LexCorp tracking the illness somehow?”

“Now there’s an angle,” said Bruce. Dick heard him typing. “The project files do make reference to other teams at LexCorp who are studying Substance X. Perhaps they were also looking at the effects of exposure.”

“You think the accident was *rigged?”*

“Maybe. Or maybe it was just a lucky coincidence.”

Dick’s eyebrows shot up. “Let the record show that I protest your use of the word ‘lucky’.”

“Noted,” Bruce agreed heavily.

Dick ran a hand through his hair. “Okay. So, what’s the game plan? What do we do now?”

“Well, you seem to have a handle on the victims,” Bruce began. “I want you to go through the GCPD’s files again, revisit their interviews with the victims’ families, and possibly re-interview witnesses. See if you can find out anything more about their physical symptoms. And check in with your contact at the coroner’s office, see if there’s anything else she can tell you about the autopsies now that we have some idea of what we might be looking for.”

Dick hesitated for a fraction of a second, then said, “Sure. I’ll see if

she's working tomorrow night."

"Meanwhile I'll keep my focus on the generator itself and the Falcone connection," Bruce continued, thankfully not seeming to notice Dick's little pause. "Clark's landed an interview with Sebastian Cronin, so I sent him home with some bugs. Hopefully Cronin will slip up and say something about what, exactly, he paid the Falcones for back in July."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then I've got a long list of Falcone fixers I can talk to," said Bruce. Every word contained a threat from Batman.

Movement caught Dick's eye from the other side of the room. Tim was waving one hand, holding up the Bat-tablet in the other. The word *CLIENT??* was typed on the screen in large font. Dick gave him a thumbs-up.

"What about Dunbar Holdings?" he asked Bruce, sitting down at the table again. "The client LexCorp is making the generator for. Do you know anything about them?"

"No," Bruce said shortly. "But I've put Oracle on research."

"Okay, good," said Dick. "I'm sure she'll find something."

Dick thought he caught sight of Tim squirming, but when he looked, Tim was sitting perfectly still.

"Good," Bruce echoed. The line was silent for a moment, but Dick could tell Bruce was still there.

"So, what time should we come tomorrow?" he asked.

"Alfred's flight gets in at 2:30," Bruce answered, "so, no earlier than 3? You know how he likes to get settled."

"Of course," Dick said fondly. "We'll aim for 4, just in case."

"Sounds good." Bruce sighed. "You should get some sleep. Especially since you and Barbara were working so late last night."

"Yeah, you too."

"Don't forget to check on Tim," Bruce reminded him. "He likes to stay up late, even though it's not good for him."

Dick glanced at Tim again and couldn't hold back a smile. "Sounds familiar, huh?"

Bruce chuckled. "A little too much." Dick was about to say goodnight and disconnect, but Bruce spoke again. "Have you noticed— I think Tim likes a challenge."

Dick frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure," Bruce admitted. "But he likes to talk about cold cases, and there was the incident with the security system."

"Oh," Dick said, all-too aware of Tim's eyes on him. "An intellectual challenge. Yeah, sure."

"But there's an element of risk involved, too."

Dick forced himself to smile, because he knew that Bruce could hear it in his voice. "Getting psychoanalytical again, B?"

"No," Bruce huffed. "Or, maybe. I don't know. It was just something Clark said. Got me thinking."

"Dangerous," Dick remarked, expecting another half-laugh, but Bruce's response was serious.

"Exactly." After a perplexing beat of silence, Bruce added, "Well. Goodnight, Dick."

"'Night, Bruce," Dick replied. He was still puzzled by the turn in the conversation, but he let it go. "See you tomorrow."

Bruce disconnected. Dick stayed where he was for a moment before he pulled the comm from his ear and dropped it on the desk. Then he got to his feet and turned to find Tim looking up at him, a bit like how a defendant might look at the foreperson of the jury. Dick smiled, but it didn't seem to ease any of Tim's tension.

"Well?" he said, when Dick didn't speak right away.

"Well," Dick repeated, "whoever your source is, they clearly know their stuff."

He walked over to the couch and sank down beside Tim as he summarized the parts of the conversation that Tim hadn't been able to hear: namely, the accident on January 5th and Bruce's suspicion that Rota and her team might not have been murdered after all.

“He really thinks so?” Tim asked. His face was pale.

“He looked at the evidence and drew a possible conclusion,” Dick half-corrected him. “Now we’ll take the investigation in that direction for a little while and see where it leads.”

Tim nodded, but he still didn’t look any better. In fact, he almost looked like he was going to throw up. Dick wondered if feeding him shawarma after midnight had been a good idea after all.

“Hey,” he said softly, reaching out to put a tentative hand on Tim’s shoulder. “You okay? What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Tim replied, but then he grimaced. “I mean, yes, I’m okay. I just—” He swallowed. “I thought I would feel better.”

Dick frowned, confused. “What do you mean, better?”

Tim shrugged. “Like... relieved, I guess? It’s good news—kinda—that the scientists weren’t deliberately killed. That whatever they were involved with, it’s possible it wasn’t murder.”

Dick nodded, then played the words back in his head. He’d thought that by ‘they’ Tim meant Rota and her team, but that didn’t actually make sense— the scientists wouldn’t be ‘involved’ with their own deaths. Dick stopped himself from asking, though, and let Tim talk.

“But instead, it’s just— I have even more questions now. I think part of me hoped that he was lying to them, or— or that there was a mistake. Or maybe I was dreaming, and the whole thing never happened. But...”

Who’s ‘he’? Dick thought. *Who’s ‘he’, and who are ‘they’?*

Dick waited, but when it became apparent that Tim was done talking for now, he exhaled slowly and spoke carefully.

“I’m not going to ask who your source is,” he said, feeling Tim tense up under his hand, “but if you were thinking about telling me, now might be a good time.”

Tim met and held his gaze for a moment, then his eyes drifted away. He stared in the direction of the kitchen for several long seconds before slowly shaking his head.

“Okay,” said Dick, disappointed but not surprised. He lifted his hand

from Tim's shoulder and prepared to get to his feet.

"I want to," Tim blurted out suddenly.

Dick froze, waited. "But?" he prompted, when that was all Tim said.

Tim's face contorted. "But there's something I need to figure out first. Something I need to do. Maybe— maybe once I know— and once I—" He sighed sharply. "Things are changing, and I think— I *hope* it's gonna make sense soon, why I can't tell you. But for now... I'm sorry," he concluded, glancing up before quickly averting his eyes.

Dick reached out again, wrapping an arm around his shoulders— offering Tim some comfort, but also so Tim wouldn't see his face as he processed this last bit of information. What could it mean? What was changing? What was Tim planning, and why?

"Nothing to be sorry for," Dick said, keeping his suspicion out of his voice. "I just hope you figure it out, whatever it is. And I'm here if you need me."

Tim nodded, his hair and hoodie rustling against Dick's long-sleeved t-shirt, then pulled away. "Thank you. I hope so, too," he muttered.

They sat side-by-side for a moment, both confined to their own thoughts. Eventually, Tim reached for the Bat-tablet, and Dick moved.

"No," he said, gently taking it from Tim's hands. "It's late. Come on, time for bed."

For a second, Tim looked like he was going to protest, but then he nodded. Dick logged out of the computer and tidied up the table, tossing the last little bit of his rice into the trash. Tim appeared in the kitchen doorway with his shawarma wrapper and an empty glass; they weaved around each other to get where they were going. Dick hit the kitchen light switch on his way out, and Tim turned off the floor lamp in the living room. Dick checked the deadbolt on the front door; Tim tested the patio door and closed the curtains. They headed to the warmly-lit bedroom hall and paused in front of the bathroom.

"Well, I'm gonna—" Tim said, awkwardly pointing.

"Yeah, I'll—" Dick gestured towards the master bedroom. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

They looked at each other a second longer before Tim shut the bathroom door. Dick slowly turned and walked down the hall to get to his own room. He closed the door and leaned against it.

The room was lit only by the ambient glow of the city outside his window, which he'd left open a crack for fresh air, even though it was nearly freezing outside. If he shut his eyes, he could imagine he was on the roof, about to take off towards his next objective, his next mission. He could imagine there were clear-cut parameters here: a Good Guy and a Bad Guy, a path from one to the next, and a means of making sure the right side won out.

But instead, everything was murky. Tim had been carrying out his own investigation into the LexCorp case for weeks, with his own set of objectives. He was concealing more than he was telling, and even an introduction to the world of Nightwing hadn't been enough to get him to come clean.

Who was Tim talking about, when he said 'he' was telling the truth to 'them,' who weren't actually involved in murder? What did he need to figure out before he could tell Dick about what was going on? What 'things' were changing, and how?

Dick didn't know how to answer those questions. But he suspected that he was in over his head, and he needed help.

Now he just had to figure out how to ask for it.

Chapter 60

Chapter Summary

Family dinner, part 1.

So, yes. Alfred wanted Tim to stay. And he had a plan to make sure it happened. He had had no warning before Jason ran away, and by the time Dick said goodbye, the young man's decision had already been set in stone. This time, Alfred had an opportunity to intervene, and he wasn't going to waste it.

Chapter Notes

Happy birthday, Tim Drake!

Lovely readers, not to sound like an AO3 stereotype, but there have been Things happening in my life the last few months, and I have been struggling to find the headspace to write. So, unfortunately, my hiatus will be extended a few more weeks. I am essentially planning to take the rest of the summer off, to allow myself some breathing room before coming back with fresh eyes. In the meantime, I'm working on some alternative creative projects— check out my tumblr for art and writing updates.

With love and heartfelt thanks,
MrsD.

The oven was almost up to temperature. The chicken—the largest he could find, almost 2 kg—had been out of the fridge for fifteen minutes, and Alfred was rough-chopping the vegetables that would serve as its bed in the roasting pan. Tomorrow morning, these vegetables, along with what was left of the chicken, would be re-purposed to make stock. Perhaps he'd use that stock to make risotto tomorrow evening. Bruce liked risotto. Did Tim like risotto? Alfred wasn't sure.

Would he say something even if he didn't? Alfred wondered. The boy was adept at keeping secrets, unless one knew how to read the signs.

Alfred hadn't told Bruce (yet?) about what he'd seen in the kitchen on Friday— the painfully familiar look on Tim's face that was at once sad and stubborn. Dick had given him that look right before he moved out of the manor. After he and Bruce argued in the Cave, Dick was

resigned to leave, despite not knowing where he'd go or what he'd do — he knew only that staying here had become intolerable. But he regretted leaving Alfred, and so had come to say goodbye.

Alfred suspected that Tim was doing the same, pulling away because he felt he had no other choice. Given the lad's history of sneaking away from his foster parents, Alfred suspected it would happen soon. He was dreading the morning he'd find an empty bedroom, a note—or, worse, no note—and he'd have to tell Bruce that it was happening again. That another child was leaving them, possibly never to return.

Dick *had* returned, of course, after considerable time and effort. But it hadn't been certain, the day he left, whether or not he ever would. And with his departure coming so soon after Jason's death, well. Alfred hadn't been certain at the time whether or not Bruce would survive such a loss.

Would he survive another? Would either of them?

Alfred pushed the vegetables off his cutting board and into the pan. Garlic—a whole bulb—went in as well. Then a drizzle of olive oil, some salt and pepper, and he left the pan where it was to start dressing the chicken.

His foray into Jason's bedroom on Friday had deeply unsettled him, as evidenced by that embarrassing display on the plane. Two days in Martha and Jonathan Kent's home had been precisely what he'd needed to start feeling like himself again. Sitting on their front porch with a cup of tea, listening to the wind cut a path through the long grass, had done him a world of good, as had speaking to someone else about his concerns regarding Tim.

"Well, it's natural for a young man to leave home in order to figure out who he is," Jonathan said early yesterday morning while they watched the red sunrise. "But—"

"He's fifteen, Jon," Martha countered.

"I was getting to that," Jonathan replied patiently. *"But,* I was gonna say, you've got to give him a good foundation as a starting point—something he can build on. He leaves too early and, well, it's like putting a shed up over a sinkhole. A young man can disappear before he knows it."

No doubt Tim was capable of disappearing, Alfred thought as he rubbed spices—salt, pepper, sage—into the chicken's butter-coated

skin. Tim had been clever enough to manipulate the manor's security system to leave in the middle of the night; what else could he do, if he felt he had no other choice? Did he have an up-to-date passport and enough money to get on a plane at a moment's notice, the way Jason had? Could he end up on the other side of the world before any of them even knew he'd left?

Alfred didn't want to find out. Alfred *refused* to find out.

"You just need to show that boy he's welcome," Martha said yesterday afternoon while they sliced apples in her bright, warm kitchen. "If he's looking to run, it must be because he doesn't know what he's worth to y'all."

Alfred agreed. Tim needed a demonstration— an unmistakable sign that he would have a place at Wayne Manor for as long as he wanted it.

"Bruce hasn't told him about the adoption, has he?" Martha asked later, her hands busy cutting cold butter into the flour mixture.

"No," Alfred sighed, sprinkling a handful of flour on the countertop and spreading the rest along the length of the rolling pin. "Tim's case worker advised against it for the time being. The news of his parents' rights possibly being revoked hit him rather hard, apparently."

Martha *tsk*ed and shook her head. "Poor kid. Gonna be tough to let go of his parents, but anybody can see they're no good for him. I'm very glad he found his way to you, Alfred. And Bruce, I suppose. Dick, definitely."

Alfred chuckled at the memory. Martha wasn't wrong: Tim had three people in this house who cared for his wellbeing and knew that the manor was the best place for him.

Alfred, however, also had a more selfish reason for wanting Tim to stay. The child had had a sort of healing presence— albeit painful at times, like a tight bandage over a deep wound. Alfred had been noticing it since Tim's earliest days at the manor. He'd seen the change in Bruce, in Dick, in himself. He'd seen the way Bruce worried about him and protected him, and Alfred understood, perhaps better than anyone, that it was good for Bruce—for Batman—to be protective.

Alfred had seen the alternative. He'd seen a Bruce that was angry and despairing. He'd seen a Batman with little compassion, who fought

like he had nothing and no one to protect, like he himself wasn't worth saving. Dick and Jason—however briefly—had brought an end to his early isolation, creating an imperfect but beautiful joy that hadn't been known in Wayne Manor since that night Thomas suggested a trip to the cinema. But on the darkest days after Jason's death, Alfred had feared there was no coming back for Bruce. Alfred had wondered if the manor would ever know family again— if Bruce would ever again become the best self he'd once been.

Now, Alfred could see glimpses of that better man. Tim brought it out in him. More than that, Tim challenged Bruce. (Arguably, he challenged Batman as well.) It was not the same way that Dick and Jason had challenged him. It was new. Tim seemed perpetually capable of surprising Bruce— which was ironic, perhaps, as he was remarkably similar to Bruce in certain ways. Alfred had known for some time that Bruce noticed the similarities between them as well, and now he worried that Bruce had invested rather too much in those commonalities— that he saw the two of them as so alike that, were Tim to break away, it risked devastating him.

So, yes. Alfred wanted Tim to stay. And he had a plan to make sure it happened. He had had no warning before Jason ran away, and by the time Dick said goodbye, the young man's decision had already been set in stone. This time, Alfred had an opportunity to intervene, and he wasn't going to waste it.

He placed the chicken atop the vegetables in the roasting pan and tilted it back slightly to expose its cavity. Inside went a lemon, its surface lightly scored, two bay leaves, and a bundle of rosemary and thyme— likely the last he'd get from the herb garden before winter. He repositioned the bird, gave it an appreciative pat, and thoroughly washed his hands.

He checked the time as he set the chicken on the oven rack. *Right on schedule.* The bird would take a little more than ninety minutes, given its size, and the boys would be arriving from Blüdhaven at any moment now.

Bruce was annoyed they weren't here yet. He hadn't said so, of course, but Alfred could tell. He himself was unbothered by Dick's tardiness; Alfred did some of his best thinking in the kitchen, and he valued the extra time.

He turned the front left burner on and placed a large saucepan atop the low flame, then picked up the container of soup that was thawing

on a folded towel in one corner of the countertop. It was last winter's butternut squash— he'd taken it out of the freezer the moment he got back from the airport, as it was a perfect appetizer for tonight. Fall was truly beginning to close in around them. It was only a little after four, and already it was almost dark.

And with the autumn chill came the Wayne Enterprises Halloween Masquerade Ball— exactly the opportunity Alfred needed to show Tim he had a place here. Given Tim's background in Gotham's high society, Alfred thought a formal, public introduction at the ball would be enough to show Tim that he had no need to run. An announcement would cement Tim's place in the family, as well as secure his safety. After all, it was only a matter of time before a reporter caught wind of the identity of Bruce's latest foster son— and Alfred would not be surprised if the Drakes 'accidentally' let something slip soon. A public appearance would both quell the rumours and help build the case for Tim's stay at the manor to become permanent.

Bruce had, of course, floated the idea of a public appearance to Tim before the Garden Party. Tim had refused then, as had been his right, but Alfred was hopeful that he'd agree to take a different course of action this time. Alfred hadn't mentioned his plan to Bruce yet, but he was almost certain that he would approve, given everything that had transpired with the Drakes that night. After all, Bruce had been angry; Bruce had made him a promise.

Tim would need a tuxedo, Alfred thought as he used a wooden spoon to break up chunks of ice in the soup. He doubted Tim had one— not one that fit, anyway. A haircut would probably also not go amiss; though if Tim wanted a wolfish mask, perhaps the long hair would work in its favour.

But Alfred was getting ahead of himself. *One step at a time,* he thought firmly.

In a perfect world, Dick would attend the ball as well. A united front of Waynes standing behind Tim would send a clear, undeniable message to both Tim and the world. But Alfred wouldn't hold his breath waiting for Dick to volunteer, and he wasn't going to try and talk Dick into it, either. Alfred remembered too clearly the last time— the only time—Dick had come to a society event after declaring he was done with them when he was Tim's age. It had been Jason's debut, and Bruce had convinced Dick to come along for support. The night had ended disastrously, with Dick all-but dragging Jason from the dance floor. Jason had been spitting, hopping mad— the whispers

had started the moment he walked into the room, and finally it got to be too much for the lad.

Dick confronted Bruce about it afterwards, and they nearly came to blows. He blamed Bruce, accusing him of using Jason as a pawn to get him there— of prioritizing the family image over his happiness and Jason's wellbeing. The worst part was, he hadn't been wrong. Bruce had acted strategically that night to get what he wanted, no matter the cost.

Alfred was well-aware that he was marching towards this dangerous territory as well. But he comforted himself with the thought that this time would be different. He would be forthright where Bruce had been deceptive, and, aside from a quick nonchalant question, he wasn't going to try to bring Dick into it at all. Also, if nothing else, Alfred comforted himself with the knowledge that Tim was extremely unlikely to start a fight on the dance floor.

There was no ice left in the soup pot when Bruce appeared at the base of the stairs, sliding his phone back into his pocket. Alfred assumed he'd just received an alert from the front gate.

"They're here?" he guessed aloud.

"Finally," Bruce confirmed. "Dick said he'd be here at four."

"We're in no hurry, Master Bruce," Alfred reminded him.

Bruce harrumphed. "Still. It's almost twenty to five."

"Well, perhaps the traffic—" Alfred began, but the side door opened before he could finish the thought. The door was on the other side of a small dividing wall that separated the entrance and coat closet from the kitchen, so Alfred heard the boys before he saw them.

"Hudson hit him so hard his whole face collapsed," Tim was saying. "There was blood all over his gloves, and I was standing pretty close, so part of the guy's jaw bone hit my boots."

In Alfred's peripheral vision, he saw Bruce's body language tighten as his facial expression contorted into one of confusion and horror. Alfred turned the burner to its lowest setting and put a lid over the soup.

"It was awesome," Tim added cheerfully.

“Sounds awesome,” said Dick. Alfred heard the door close. “But how’d you guys figure out that he robbed the apothecary?”

“Callie went through his pockets.”

“After his face exploded, I assume.”

“No, before. Callie pickpockets all the time.”

Bruce was outright frowning now. His brows furrowed even more when Dick laughed.

Alfred heard the closet snick shut, and he looked over to see Dick emerge from the foyer. Then— Alfred wasn’t sure how he did it; sometimes when Dick moved he just *moved,* with no visible intervening steps. Dick swung around the dividing wall, reached out with one hand, and pulled Bruce forward into a hug that was over almost as soon as it began. He then carried on towards Alfred while Bruce stood blinking near the foyer, seemingly bewildered.

“Hello, dear boy,” Alfred greeted Dick, who gave him a much longer and more telegraphed embrace.

“Hello, dear Alfred,” Dick parried back. He let go but didn’t go far, instead lifting the lid on the soup pot to take a look at what was inside. “Is there turnip in this?”

“Master Grayson,” said Alfred, playing up how offended he was by the question, but not by much. “In all these years, have I ever forgotten your aversion to rutabaga?”

“No,” Dick had to admit, suitably chagrined.

“It’s butternut squash,” Alfred went on. “With carrot, ginger, and an apple for sweetness.”

“Sounds delicious,” said Tim from behind him. Alfred turned and smiled, offering a one-armed hug that Tim leaned into for roughly two seconds. But that was two seconds more than Alfred was expecting, so he took it as a victory.

“Welcome home,” he said, and Tim shifted his weight, raising his backpack higher onto his shoulders. “How was your weekend?”

“Good,” Tim answered brightly, but he gestured towards the stairs. “I’ll just put away my bag, then I can come back and help you.”

“Alright,” Alfred agreed, and Tim went.

“Everything okay?” Bruce asked Dick in a low voice the moment Tim’s footsteps faded.

“Yes, Bruce, everything’s fine,” Dick replied, sounding exasperated. He moved away from the stove.

Bruce raised his eyebrows questioningly at Alfred. Alfred nodded. Yes, he’d seen it too, but—he gave Bruce a stern look—if Dick didn’t want to talk, there wasn’t anything either of them could do.

Bruce scowled faintly. Alfred was right, and he didn’t like it.

“Dinner will be served at six-thirty,” Alfred announced into the somewhat tense silence. “In the meantime, shall we have tea in the sitting room?”

“That sounds lovely, Alfred,” said Bruce. Dick nodded as well, avoiding eye contact with both of them.

Alfred filled the kettle and set it on the rear left burner. While it heated, he asked Dick to pull a ceramic teapot down from a high cupboard. Dick fetched it without any of his usual theatrics— perhaps sensing that the teapot had great sentimental value, or perhaps too distracted by whatever was on his mind to perform. The latter, Alfred had to admit, was definitely more cause for concern than the former.

Dick’s demeanour brightened the moment they could hear Tim’s footsteps returning down the stairs. Alfred dropped two teabags into the pot and listened as Dick prompted Tim to continue his story. It was about that roleplaying game he’d started with his friends last week, and Bruce interrupted several times to be brought up to speed; Tim apparently hadn’t shared any details of the game with him. They exited the kitchen, and Alfred took a few extra minutes to ensure he had everything before pushing the tea cart along behind them.

They settled, Tim and Dick on the couch, Bruce in one of the armchairs. They’d left the other chair open—next to Tim’s side of the sofa, and closest to the coffee table—and Alfred took it after seeing everyone served. Their talk of wizards, warriors, and make-believe violence carried the conversation for nearly half an hour before Tim seemed to run out of things to say. He munched on the small cheddar scone and sipped the glass of milk that Alfred had added to the tea tray just for him.

Alfred waited a beat to see if either Dick or Bruce wished to change the subject, and when neither did, he took the opportunity to speak. “Master Bruce,” he began, “I was just reminded of the masquerade ball coming up at the end of the month.”

“Oh?” Alfred could tell at once that he’d raised Bruce’s suspicions, but this was to be expected. “And what reminded you of that, Alfred?”

“All this talk of mysticism and magic, I suppose,” Alfred replied casually.

“’Tis the spooky season and all,” Dick put in. “I can’t believe that event’s still going. I always thought it was so corny.”

Bruce shrugged. To everyone else in the room it no doubt looked easy, but Alfred noticed the tension in his shoulders. “The board likes it.”

“It’s a Halloween party?” Tim guessed.

“And a fundraiser,” said Bruce.

“Did your parents ever take you?” Dick asked Tim.

Alfred also noticed the quick look Bruce sent Dick’s way, and Dick’s minor wince in response. Tim, meanwhile, shook his head without a word.

“It’s not really an event for young children,” Alfred said, hoping to smooth this over quickly and get back on track. He glanced at Dick. “And, I daresay, young adults probably already have plans that are more fun, but in case you don’t—”

“Nope,” Dick said outright. “Nice try, Alfred, but you’re not dragging me into this.”

Bruce’s shoulders were now exceedingly tight as he raised his teacup to take a sip. Alfred pretended not to notice.

“Very well,” he said. “What about you, Master Tim?”

Tim froze with the scone halfway to his mouth. Crumbs were scattered on his shirt. “Me?”

“Alfred,” Bruce said— a barely audible warning that Alfred ignored.

“Yes, you,” he told Tim. “Would you like to attend?”

Tim's head turned, his eyes finding Bruce first, then Dick. Neither man seemed to meet his gaze; Dick was frowning off into the distance, and Bruce was half-glaring directly at Alfred. Others might have quailed before that stormy expression, but Alfred continued.

"The reason I ask is, I would need to get you a tuxedo," he said, drawing Tim's attention back. "Such things take time, so if you do wish to attend the ball, I'll need to know in the next few days."

Tim swallowed and looked down. "Um. I don't— maybe? But—"

"Okay," Bruce said, in a tone that meant *that's enough.* "If you want to come to the masquerade ball, Tim, you are of course welcome. But you don't have to. Nobody is going to make you."

Dick glanced at him when he said that. Tim nodded and went back to his scone. Bruce got to his feet.

"Alfred, a word?" he said, though Alfred didn't need him to. He was already standing as well, and heading for the kitchen.

The door had barely swung shut behind them when Bruce said, "What the hell are you doing?" He didn't wait for an answer before continuing. "And don't give me a line about how long it takes to order a tux. I'm smarter than that. So is Tim, for the record."

"I apologize, Master Bruce," Alfred said patiently. "I assumed—erroneously, it appears—that you had already raised the topic of the ball with Tim."

Bruce's continued glare made it clear that he saw right through Alfred's lie.

"You said you had reviewed the guest list to ensure the Drakes weren't on it," Alfred went on. "The ball is only twenty days away, and with everything that happened at the Garden Party, you must see the merits of Tim making a public appearance."

Bruce didn't argue this point, but he didn't agree, either.

"Evidently, I should have spoken about it with you in private first," Alfred concluded.

"Yes," Bruce agreed curtly. "You should have."

"Forgive me, sir," said Alfred, hoping he sounded contrite.

Bruce stood perfectly still, a rock of a man before him, and considered it. Alfred waited, equally firm.

Finally, Bruce exhaled. “You’re not wrong,” he admitted. “It would be good if Tim made a public appearance at the ball. A few people caught sight of the Drakes being escorted out of the Garden Party, so the rumour mill has been working overtime already.”

Alfred nodded. He hadn’t been aware of this, but it was not surprising.

“But *I* will talk to Tim about the ball,” Bruce said. “I was planning on doing it tonight after Dick left, or in the next couple of days.”

“Of course,” Alfred said quickly— too quickly, because Bruce’s glare returned.

“I *was,”* he insisted. “You didn’t need to push me.”

Alfred met his gaze steadily. Bruce looked away first.

“I was thinking about asking Tim if he’d like to photograph the event,” he said, which caught Alfred completely off-guard.

“Sir?” he prompted.

“I thought he might like to get involved with WE’s social media team,” Bruce explained, though he still wouldn’t meet Alfred’s eye. “Kind of like an internship, trial run kind of thing. I thought it would give him a chance to attend without— without a public announcement, if he still didn’t want that.”

“An intriguing compromise,” said Alfred. Bruce shrugged one shoulder, looking very much like the teenager he used to be, the one who hated compliments.

“With the event happening downtown, I didn’t—I *don’t*—want to leave Tim here at the manor. But if he doesn’t want to attend officially, he could go in casual clothes with his camera, and no one would even know he was there.”

“Except you,” Alfred said, and he smiled because this was what he was thinking about earlier: that protective instinct, the urge to spread his wings—or, cape, as it were—and shelter an innocent behind him.

“The position would give him an excuse to stay close,” Bruce continued. Alfred could tell he’d been thinking about this for days. He

regretted bringing it up before Bruce was ready. “I could keep an eye on him, make sure he doesn’t take off. And, obviously, I would hope that it’d also be kind of fun for him, to take pictures and contribute to the event’s social media presence.”

“Indeed,” Alfred murmured, proud of his boy. “I’m sorry,” he added after a moment. “I should have trusted you had a plan.”

“Well.” Bruce’s mouth twisted wryly. “I have it on good authority that it helps when I say these things out loud.”

Alfred huffed a surprised laugh. Bruce patted him on the shoulder and left the kitchen.

Alfred stared after him for a beat. Then he checked on the chicken—according to the thermometer, its internal temperature was rising at the expected pace—and got started on the potatoes.

End Notes

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